

Myths of the Body : Performing Identity in Genet

by

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Abstract

The issue of sexual and racial identity unfolds in a paradoxical light in Genet's works. Identity as a fixed essence is both deconstructed and maintained. His enigmatic portrayal of identity is addressed from a theoretical perspective which combines seemingly contradictory positions, namely essentialism and deconstruction. Such a theoretical stand claims that although identity categories are not fixed essences and consequently can be deconstructed, they must be maintained as political categories in order to deal with oppressive systems which construct essentialist-based identities. Through Genet's presentation of identity as a body performance, race and sex are deconstructed. At the same time, he illustrates how male dominance and racism maintain identities as fixed categories.

Résumé

Dans les oeuvres de Jean Genet le problème de l'identité raciale et sexuelle est posée de manière paradoxale, en ce sens que l'identité est perçue comme une catégorie essentielle qu'il faut à la fois déconstruire et maintenir. Dans ce mémoire nous analysons la catégorie de l'identité à partir d'une perspective théorique qui réunit deux positions a priori opposées : celle de l'essentialisme et celle de la déconstruction. Une telle perspective théorique permet d'avancer que, bien que l'identité ne constitue pas une essence et puisse en conséquence être déconstruite, il convient de la maintenir comme essence à des fins politiques pour rendre compte des systèmes opprimants qui construisent des catégories fixes et essentielles. En montrant que l'identité est fondée sur des actes corporels, Genet déconstruit l'identité comme catégorie fixe. En même temps, il montre comment la dominance masculine et le racisme entretiennent une vision essentielle de l'identité sexuelle et raciale.

Introduction

Emerging from Jean Genet's writing are issues which dominate theoretical concerns of race-relations and feminism. It may seem incongruous to apply a feminist framework to those works of Genet which focus on issues of sexuality since they deal primarily with male homosexuality and not specifically with the concerns of women. Nevertheless, Genet's primarily homosexual world, in which issues of masculinity and femininity emerge, can be positioned within a feminist sphere.¹ In contrast to Genet's cryptic feminist stance, his concern with racial oppression, in particular white racism toward blacks, is evident in his writing and his political actions. Jean Genet's play *Les Nègres*, written in 1958, deals explicitly with the issue of the oppression of blacks in a white dominated society.² Furthermore, in 1970, he worked against racism by assisting the Black Panther Party to rally the support of white American college students for the liberation of Bobby Seale and to stop the genocide of the Black Panthers and the black people.³ Jean Genet did not only support the concerns of the Black Panther movement but fought against other oppressive forces. He helped the PLO in Jordan and demonstrated for Algerian immigrants in France.⁴ In his writing, Genet spoke for society's marginalized and "invisible" people -

¹ Both Cynthia Running Rowe and Kate Millet have done feminist readings of Genet's work. See Rowe, Cynthia Running, "Jean Genet and Hélène Cixous: Reading Genet through the Feminine" *D A I.* 1986 Sept.; 47 (3): 927A, "The Medusa's Tale" *Feminine Writing and La Genet Romantic Review* 80 3 (1989) . 483-495, Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Ballantine, 1970) 470-507.

² Jean Genet wrote a number of articles which deal with racism towards blacks in America during the 1970's and the role of the Black Panthers. See "Angela et ses freres," *Le Nouvel Observateur* 303 (31 Aug 1970) 19-21; trans. Judy Oringer; "Here and Now for Bobby Seale," *Ramparts* 8 12 (June 197): 30-31, *May Day Speech* description by Allen Ginsberg (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1970) ; "Genet: Whites and the Panthers", *Willamette Bridge* 3.14 (3 April 1970): 7.

³ Robert Sandarg, "Jean Genet and the Black Panther Party," *Journal of Black Studies*. 16.3 (1986): 272

⁴ *Ibid* , 281

criminals, maids, homosexuals and blacks. Genet has been often regarded as a spokesperson for oppressed people. Where the approach to Genet proposed in this thesis deviates from other analyses of his writing is the way in which it attempts to show that issues of identity, performance and oppression are intertwined.

It is through Genet's enigmatic portrayal of identity that the problematics of racial and sexual differentiation surfaces. The present analyses keeps alive and works within Genet's paradoxical portrayal of identity rather than resolving it as a large number of his critics have done. In Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of Genet, related in *Saint Genet: Comédien et Martyr*, he resolves the contradictions in Genet's writing. The issue of identity in Genet's works has been largely viewed from a Sartrian perspective. The influence of Sartre is strongly felt in much of the critical literature on Genet. Hidden behind the various ideological frameworks of Genet's major critics, such as the political approach of Philip Thody, the sociological analysis of Lucien Goldmann and the mythological study of Lewis Cetta, is Sartre's Genet. Furthermore, Joseph McMahon and Richard Coe's philosophical approach to Genet's writing echoes Sartrian existentialism.⁵

Although Sartre's philosophical understanding of Genet contains insightful elements, the Sartrian approach does impose certain conceptual frameworks which are not completely reflective of Genet's texts. The way in which Sartre addresses the paradox in Genet's writing suppresses its creative potential. The contradiction which structures most of Genet's works is the

⁵ Philip Thody, *Jean Genet: A Study of His Novels and Plays* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), Lucien Goldmann, "The Theater of Genet: A Sociological Study," *Genet. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Brooks and Joseph Halpern (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 31-46; Lewis Cetta, *Profane Play, Ritual, and Jean Genet* (University, AL.: University of Alabama Press, 1979); Richard Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), Joseph McMahon, *The Imagination of Jean Genet* (New Haven, CT.: Yale UP, 1963).

following. The characters of both Genet's novels and his plays are imprisoned by identities which are imposed upon them by a dominant authority and consequently determine their essence. At the same time, he reveals that the imposed identities and the power of the subjugator are illusionary. Sartre resolves this instability in Genet's work in a theory which is based on a partial biographical account of Genet's life. According to Sartre, Genet's being, his identity as a thief, had been imposed upon him by the good bourgeois society. As Genet can only seize his existence through the other, he is compelled to live in the world of appearance and falseness. According to Sartre, all of Genet's behaviour, his criminal, homosexual and artistic activities, were motivated towards realizing the singular goal of capturing the identity that had been cast upon him. For Genet the attainment of true being is an impossibility. Sartre also reveals that the identity of the dominant authority, which determines the essence of the subordinate other, is also false. Nevertheless, Sartre reinstates the false identity by concluding that a false one is more true than a real one. Rather than dealing with the simultaneous presence of the real and the false in Genet's works, Sartre eradicates the paradox. Although certain concepts that Sartre isolates in Genet's works, namely the illusionary power of the dominant authority, the equation of appearance and essence, and the link between identity and gesture, cohere with the portrayal of identity that emerges in Genet's writing, Sartre's theory if applied faithfully to Genet's plays and novels does not take into account the paradoxical portrayal of identity.⁶

As Genet does not resolve the paradoxical portrayal of identity, it is surely possible that he wants the contradictions in his writing to remain intact. Although Genet's realm is divided into binary polarities, he nonetheless allows for their interconnection. Sartre's imposition of a rigid framework of binary

⁶ *Saint Genet: Comédien et Martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952)

polarities upon Genet's writing does not take into account the interplay of binary oppositions. It is only by approaching the issue of identity within its paradox that Genet's portrait of sexual and racial identities can be fully grasped. For Genet, identity categories are simultaneously real and contrived. By virtue of an enigmatic portrayal of identity, Genet reveals that a given identity whether it be a particular sex, sexual orientation or racial origin does not correspond to an original, true or natural essence and is in this sense contrived. Nevertheless, identity categories become at the same time real through the oppression arising from racism, heterosexism and male dominance.

As an individual's race and sex do not refer to an original or natural essence, identity in Genet's writing will be presented as a body performance. Although he discloses that the way in which individual characters perform their gestures is subjected to asymmetric power structure, he demonstrates the possibility of performing one's identity in a manner that is not completely determined. Identity lies within the fixed polarities of determinism and free will. While Genet does reveal that identity is imposed, he veers away from a purely Sartrean perspective by illustrating that identity is not completely determined by an other.

Genet's portrayal of identity is useful in addressing a dilemma concerning the issue of identity within feminist theory and theories dealing with issues of race, in particular black identity. Theorists in these two areas are often faced with the following paradox. If they adopt the post-structuralist claim that identity categories should be deconstructed, they lose the subject of their theory. Many feminists choose to deconstruct the term "woman" to reveal that it does not refer to a fixed essence based upon immutable truths or biology. Similarly, the category of race, which establishes biological or cultural differences between

people, has also been deconstructed by a number of race-relations theorists. The deconstruction of identity constructs becomes problematic for those individuals who are denied access to the privileges enjoyed by the middle class, heterosexual white male. If they adopt the post-structuralist stance and deconstruct identity construct, for whom can they speak out against such oppressive systems as racism, sexism and heterosexism? Nevertheless, categories of identity can be simultaneously deconstructed and maintained. Identities can be deconstructed as fixed essences based upon biological or cultural arguments that differentiate sexes, sexual orientations and races, but maintained as political categories. Although such an approach may appear paradoxical, it is merely reflective of the situation which is imposed upon such individuals in society as homosexuals, blacks and women. Having their identity imposed upon them as a fixed essence, they are compelled to maintain the identity category in order to fight against the oppression that has arisen from imposed rigid identities. Jean Genet's seemingly contradictory portrayal of identity mirrors the paradoxical situation which certain individuals in society are forced to live. This paradox is echoed in the way that certain theorists in race-relations and feminism have settled the debate over whether to deconstruct or salvage identity categories.

Both chapters address the issue of identity from similar perspectives even though each one focuses on different identity categories. Through a reading of two of Jean Genet's novels, *Querelle de Brest* and *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, and one of his plays, *Les Bonnes*, the issue of sexual differentiation and its implications are explored in the first chapter. In the second chapter, the question of racial differentiation unfolds in an analysis of *Les Nègres*. A parallel argument underlies the approach to the questions of race and sex. Although

racial and sexual identities do not exist as fixed essences, categories of identity such as woman, man, heterosexual, homosexual, white and black become real through their corporeal expressions and the systems of oppression that strive to maintain identity differentiation. Chapter one deals with the issue of male dominance and heterosexism while chapter two focuses on racism.

Given the similarity in approach to the issue of sex and race, the theoretical concerns in each chapter consequently overlap. The central argument emerging from Genet's writing can be seen in terms of the debate between an essentialist or constructivist approach to identity. The way in which Diana Fuss has incorporated both essentialism and constructivism in her approach to female, homosexual and black identity is reflective of Genet's handling of this issue. In re-thinking identity as a body performance, which does not refer to an essential, natural or original identity, the writings of Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are applied to Genet's treatment of race and sex.

Within each chapter there are specific theoretical concerns. In addressing the sexual identity and body performance in chapter one, the works of various writers such as Nancy M. Henley, Jill Dolan, Erving Goffman and Sue-Ellen Case are cited. In order to sever the corporeal expression of masculinity and femininity from the discourse of the natural, Genet discloses how there exists a similarity between the bodily performance of sexual categories in both heterosexual and homosexual realms. Besides Judith Butler's theoretical framework, the writings of Michel Foucault, Ester Newton, Gregg Blackford and Kenneth Pumber are called into play to deal with the interconnection between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

In chapter two, Sartre's theory is brought forth to see where a Sartrian

analysis of racial identity could both contribute to and thwart the development of a more creative approach to identity than critics since Sartre have claimed emerges from Genet's writing. The writings of two critics of Genet, Sylvie Debevec Henning and Una Chaudhuri, whose analyses break off from the Sartrean model, are applied to the present analysis of racial identity. A number of theorists who deal with the issues of racial identity and racism are integrated in the analysis of Genet's play. These theorists include Bell Hooks, Marilyn Frye, Angela Y. Davis, Joyce A. Joyce, Anthony Appiah, Houston A. Baker, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Timothy Maliquelim Simone and Frantz Fanon. While the approach to Genet's writing may seem highly theoretical, these theories will not be forced onto Genet's texts but will illuminate what appears to be emerging in Genet's writing.

Sexual Identity and Body Performance in Genet

"Le cinéma - entre autres jeux -
enseigne le naturel, un naturel tout d'artifices
et mille fois plus trompeur que le vrai."

- Jean Genet, *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*

Jean Genet's portrayal of masculine and feminine identity will be addressed in light of selected feminist and poststructuralist perspectives. It could be argued that such a theoretical marriage is problematic. While poststructuralism advocates the death of the fixed subject including the female subject¹, many feminists strive to maintain a concept of 'woman' in whose name political representation and activity can be grounded.² Both Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are opposed to maintaining a definitive category of woman. For Foucault the construction of fixed identities, such as the female identity, participates in the discourse of power which constructs subjects and then constrains them.³ According to Derrida, the category of woman only exists in relation to man. Any attempt to maintain this category merely reproduces the binary framework that oppresses women. Julia Kristeva, a feminist who is influenced by the poststructuralists, proposes a negative feminism which seeks only to undermine present structures that maintain the identity of female. According to Kristeva, any construction of the concept of woman would elicit a

¹ Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs* (1988): 418-419.

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 1.

³ Michel Foucault, "Why Study Power: The question of the Subject," *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1983) 212.

re-entry into the discourse of power.⁴

The anti-essentialist stance that has been adopted by certain feminists from poststructuralism does not jeopardize feminism but can only add to the feminist project by illuminating how the construction of female and male subjectivity is part of the mechanisms of oppressive power which feminist theory attempts to undermine.⁵ Although feminism can still prevail in the midst of a deconstructed female subject, this theoretical framework cannot lose sight of the effects which essentialism still has on women's lives. While accepting the claim that female identity cannot be derived from a fixed nature, feminism cannot escape the constraining power which essentialist-based concepts of female identity exercise upon women's freedom. Consequently, feminist thought finds itself at odds with the poststructural claim that the individual is empowered to change his or her identity. In particular, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is critical of the pluralist stance. Pluralism is based upon what she terms the 'ideology of free enterprise' which assumes the sovereignty of the individual subject.⁶ Consequently, this aspect of poststructuralism dismisses the feminist claim that women's freedom along with others are constrained.⁷

Jean Genet's literary works illuminate the problematic in feminism which must incorporate the poststructuralist claim that any fixed definition of female subject is theoretically problematic while proclaiming that the freedom of women is constrained by fixed concepts of femininity. In Genet's works, the freedom of both men and women is curtailed by archetypal portrayals of man and woman. The assertion that men as well as women are oppressed by fixed

⁴ Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation between Power and Denial," *New French Feminism*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981) 137.

⁵ Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism", 421.

⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics in Interpretation", *The Politics of Interpretation*, ed. W.J. T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: U. of Chicago P., 1983) 352.

⁷ Tania Modleski, "Feminism and the Power of Interpretation: Some Critical Readings", *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986) 122.

identities does not have a place in a feminist discussion. Nevertheless, feminism should re-address the way it has typically approached masculinity. A great deal of feminist thought "too, ironically privileges man as unproblematic or exempted from determination by gender relations"⁸ Genet's work deconstructs the fixed essences of 'man' and 'woman' by revealing that what is regarded as natural behaviour for men and women is in reality a social construction. At the same time, Genet reveals how stereotypical conceptions of masculinity and femininity, which are founded upon natural and ideal concepts of sexual identity, repress both women and men.

The social construction of gendered identity in Genet's text emerges through the portrayal of gender as a body performance which does not correspond to a natural or true concept of sexual identity. Although the idea of gender as body performance will be addressed mainly in light of Judith Butler's theory, the works of other theorists of body performance such as Erving Goffman, Nancy Henley, Jill Dolan and Sande Zeig will be used. By questioning the source of the body's performance of a particular sexual identity from a Derridian perspective, femininity and masculinity is further removed from its link to a natural or ideal construct. Genet subverts the relationship between the original and its copy to unveil the non-originary nature of what is commonly regarded as original identities. Genet's texts reveal that gendered identity does not refer to an original construct of femininity and masculinity. Although he illustrates that sexual identity does not refer to a fixed, natural or original nature, he simultaneously discloses that gendered identity is a body performance that is enacted in accordance with the dictates of heterosexuality. By revealing how homosexuals and heterosexuals alike must conform to socially constructed

⁸ Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory", *Signs* 12.4 (1987): 629.

concepts of 'natural' gendered behaviour, which are postulates of the heterosexual hegemony, Genet evokes the repressive power of heterosexual constructions of sexual identity.

A discussion of masculinity and femininity will emerge from Jean Genet's novels *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, *Querelle de Brest* and the play *Les Bonnes*. Although the three works address the relationship between masculinity and femininity, one of the sex categories predominates in each text. *Les Bonnes* illuminates the feminine. The play takes place in the confined space of Madame's apartment. When Madame is absent her two maids, the sisters, Claire and Solange, enact the murder of Madame. Solange plays Claire, the Maid, who attempts to murder Madame, whose role is performed by Claire. The discussion of femininity in *Les Bonnes* will stem from the performance of Madame's femininity, both by the real Madame and the fake one. Although *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs* is a novel about male homosexuals, the question of femininity will be addressed through the novel's principle character, the transvestite Divine, who is referred to as a woman in the novel. *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs* relates Divine's relationships with various men, first, Mignon and then Gorgui. The presence of Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs, who threatens to take Divine's lovers away, triggers a sense of insecurity in Divine. As Divine ages, she feels that her beauty is fading. She experiences a gradual loss of self worth, which leads to her deterioration and eventual death. Whereas femininity is prominent in *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs* and *Les Bonnes*, masculinity prevails in *Querelle De Brest*. In this novel, Genet relates a myriad of mainly homosexual love encounters which are both real and fantasized. It could be argued that as *Querelle De Brest* is a novel about homosexuality, it does not address the issue of heterosexual masculinity. Genet's novel reveals, nonetheless, that there

exists little difference between a homosexual expression of masculinity and a heterosexual one.

In *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, *Querelle De Brest* and *Les Bonnes*, the categories of sex are produced through relations of power which privilege the masculine. In Genet's works, male and female do not refer to biological men or women, but are terms for a set of effects produced in relations of power. Genet's portrayal of sex categories resembles Michel Foucault's claim that sexuality "is the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology."⁹ Underlying the expression of masculinity and femininity is a power structure which privileges the male over the female. The asymmetric relation of power produces the masculine and feminine positions. Although Divine has a male body, she is female by virtue of her sexual relationships in which she assumes the submissive position.¹⁰ As Genet says of Divine, "Sans doute, elle-même n'était pas femme (c'est-à-dire femelle à jupe) elle ne tenait à cela que par sa soumission au male impérieux."¹¹

The asymmetric relations of power of masculinity and femininity or dominance and submissiveness have a ubiquitous presence in Genet's writing. In *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, he draws an analogy between the submissive status expressed by the lack of pockets in girl's clothing, the lack of a zipper in sailor's pants and the single pocket of the pants worn in the colonies:

Le pantalon des colons n'a qu'une poche: voilà encore ce qui les isole du monde. Une seule poche, à gauche. Tout un système social est dérangé par ce simple détail dans le costume. Leur pantalon n'a qu'une poche, comme la culotte si

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1 An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random, Vintage, 1980) 127.

¹⁰ In *Saint Genet: Comédien et Martyr*, Jean-Paul Sartre provides an in depth analysis of the way Genet's characters are defined in terms of the other. (Sartre's analysis of Genet will be dealt with in the second chapter of this thesis.)

¹¹ Jean Genet, *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs* (Paris: Marc Barbezat-L'Arbalète, 1948) 285.

collante du diable n'en a pas, comme ceux des matelots n'ont pas de braguette, et il n'est pas douteux qu'ils n'en soient humiliés, comme si on les eût amputés d'un attribut sexuel mâle - c'est bien de cela qu'il s'agit; les poches qui jouent un si grand rôle dans l'enfance, sont pour nous un signe de supériorité sur les filles.¹²

The submissive status of the female and the dominant status of the male is expressed through exterior codes of dress, gesture and language. Given the scarcity of women in the two novels, femininity is conveyed by the male body. The masculine body is manipulated to bring forth the hierarchical structure of sexual identity. The dominant masculine position is produced by a rigidity of the body and economy of gesture and language. The submissive 'female' body is characterized by movement, fluidity, softness and a visible display of gesture. Genet's description of the body display of the 'girl-queens' and 'boy-queens'¹³ in *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs* reveals the difference in male and female corporeal expression. As Genet writes:

Toutes, les tantes-filles et tantes-gars, tapettes, pédales, tantoues, dont je vous parle sont réunies au bas de l'escalier. Elles se blottissent l'une et l'un contre l'autre et bavardent, pépient, les tantes-filles, autour des tantes-gars droits, vertigineux, immobiles et silencieux comme des branches.¹⁴

In *Querelle de Brest*, during the encounter between the passive Armenian and the dominant Jonas, femininity and masculinity are enacted in a similar fashion as in *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*. In the presence of the passive Armenian, Jonas' body assumes the stiff and motionless stance of the dominant male. In contrast to Jonas, the Armenian's body is completely fluid. When he

¹² Ibid., 243.

¹³ The terms 'girl-queen' and 'boy-queen' are taken from Bernard Frechtman's translation. See Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, intro. Jean-Paul Sartre (New York: Grove Press, 1963) 59.

¹⁴ Genet, *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, 20.

laughs, his entire body trembles.¹⁵ Although the female display of the male-sexed body is common in the two novels, it does arise, though less frequently, that masculinity is emitted by the female body. Lysiane, who is a woman in terms of her genital sex, desires a masculine expression of her body. Even though Lysiane is passive in relation to her husband, Norbert, who only allows her to have access to the men with whom he has already had intercourse, she is dominant as a mistress to her prostitutes and, for a time, in her love affair with Robert, a lover with whom Norbert has never slept.¹⁶ Madame Lysiane desires a male expression of her body which would transform her fluid curves into a solid immobile mass of domination. As Genet says of Lysiane's desire: "Madame Lysiane regretta cette époque où la femme était roi. Elle regrettait les corsets, les buses, les baleines qui raidissaient le corps, lui donnaient assez de solennité pour dominer les mœurs, et de férocité."¹⁷

Genet illustrates how the display and performance of the male-sexed body is bifurcated to produce either the dominant status of the masculine or the subordinate position of the feminine. Although Genet deals with corporal expression and its link to power mainly within homosexual interactions, his description of gendered differentiation of posture, gesture and body movement resembles accounts of gender differences in heterosexuals. According to Nancy Henley, heterosexual difference in body display and movement are not apolitical but are maintained in order to express male dominance and female subordination. The postures and movements of femininity cannot be used to obtain power. She cites a number of typically female expressions, which elicit

¹⁵ Jean Genet, *Querelle de Brest* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953) 210.

¹⁶ The idea that Madame Lysiane occupies the masculine position in her relationship with Robert does not correspond with the way madame Lysiane has been typically regarded by critics. Madame Lysiane is regarded as a maternal figure. See Mary Ann Frese Witt, "Mothers and Stories: Female Presence/Power in Genet", *French Forum* 14.2 (1989): 176.

¹⁷ Genet, *Querelle de Brest*, 157

the feminine submissive status, of which some are the tilted head, preening, eyes lowered and looking up and self-protective enclosing leg and arm movements.¹⁸ Similar to Jean Genet's observation of the differences in female and male expression, Henley discloses how female subordination is transmitted through demure and impotent body gestures whereas masculine dominance is enacted through gestures of empowerment. Using research in differences between the corporal expressions of white and black men, Henley states how the white males' demonstration of masculinity resembles Jean Genet's men. The dominant stance of the white male is to have "a rigid body, legs spread, arms still at the sides and hands in fists".¹⁹ The nonverbal dominance and subordination displayed by homosexuals in Genet's novels thus resembles heterosexual expressions. The homosexual enactments of masculinity and femininity in Genet's world reproduce patriarchal norms of male dominance. According to Gregg Blackford, the homosexual community "reproduces characteristics of the dominant culture which are associated with male assertiveness and (faulty at least) female subordination."²⁰

The idea that sexual identity is composed of corporeal acts that can be appropriated and manipulated pervades throughout Genet's writing. In the play-acting game of *Les Bonnes*, Claire and Solange put on the gestures of a Maid and a Madame. The maids' appropriation of the gestures of a Maid and a Madame are not only a performance of sexual identity but also of class. In *Les Bonnes*, Genet illustrates how sex and class are interconnected. The demure femininity of the maids is a reflection of social status as Madame's flamboyant

¹⁸ Nancy M. Henley, "The Dance of Life: Posture, Gesture and body Movement", *Body Politics: Power, Sex and Nonverbal Communication* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1975) 137, 139, 145.

¹⁹ Ibid, 132.

²⁰ See Gregg Blackford, "Male Dominance and the Gay World", *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*, ed. Kenneth Plummer (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1981) 193.

femininity is a mark of her elevated social standing. Claire appropriates the upper-class feminine gestures of Madame, and Solange performs the femininity of her sister, Claire. In the maids' game Solange enacts a role which should be 'natural' for a maid to perform, namely acting as a maid and Claire assumes the 'unnatural' role of performing the gestures of a wealthy mistress. Throughout *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, Divine appropriates gestures of others, and at one point in the novel attempts the gestures of a male. As Genet writes, "Elle chercha des gestes mâles qui sont rarement des gestes de mâle. Elle siffla, mit ses mains dans ses poches, et tout ce simulacre fut exécuté si malhablement qu'elle paraissait être en une soirée quatre ou cinq personnages à la fois."²¹ Divine's failure to successfully perform the gestures of a man, when 'she' is in fact male in terms of her genital-sex, illustrates how supposedly 'normal' gestures can become foreign. As 'she' is not an actual woman, the female gestures she performs are also an appropriation. In Divine's case, both her 'natural' appropriation of masculinity and 'unnatural' performance of femininity are contrived corporeal acts. In *Querelle de Brest*, the dominant male figures control the intensity of their performance of masculinity depending with whom they are. Norbert presents a more virile demeanour in the presence of Robert, Querelle's brother, than when he is with his lover, Querelle.

"En face de Robert, Nono reprenait sa véritable virilité qu'il perdait peu avec Querelle. Non qu'il y prit l'âme ou les gestes d'un pédé, mais auprès de Querelle, cessant de considérer un homme qui aime les femmes, il baignait dans l'atmosphère spéciale que suscite toujours un homme aimant les hommes."²²

Norbert allows his performance of masculinity to wane in the presence of his lover, Querelle, who occupies the submissive status in their sexual relationship,

²¹ Genet, *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, 125-126.

²² Genet, *Querelle de Brest*, 110.

and maintains his dominant male authority when he is with Robert, who has never jeopardized his dominant male status by engaging in a homosexual relationship. In contrast to Norbert, Gil, who assumes the dominant position in his relationship with Roger, allows his performance of masculinity to subside in Roger's absence. Genet comments, "En l'absence de Roger, Gil pouvait s'abandonner un peu. Il n'avait plus à faire l'homme."²³ Through gesture appropriation, Genet has his characters consciously put on both "natural" and artificial gestures.

Along with the manipulation of female and male gestures, the exaggerated depiction of male and female identity which is apparent in the three works reveals to what extent the performance of sexual identity is contrived. There are numerous instances in the three works where the performance of sexual roles has the exaggerated allure of a drag show. The following portrayal of Norbert, the archetypal dominant male figure in *Querelle de Brest*, appears to be a pantomime of masculinity:

Débraillé, debout en face des fesses de Querelle, Norbert était seul. D'un doigt tranquille et léger, il libéra sa queue du caleçon court et un instant il la tint, lourde et dressée, à pleine main. Il vit son image dans la glace en face de lui et il la devina vingt fois répétée dans cette pièce. Il était fort. Il était le maître.²⁴

The extreme portrayal of masculinity that pervades throughout the novel is further revealed when Querelle is overwhelmed by the overpowering maleness of Norbert and Mario together:

Mario était immobile, presque absent. Il était debout contre le comptoir et derrière lui la glace réfléchissait son dos. Sans dire un mot il se détacha de cet accoudoir qui lui

²³ Ibid., 153.

²⁴ Genet, *Querelle De Brest*, 65.

permettait une pose intéressante, et il vint s'adosser au miroir, près du patron: Il parut alors s'appuyer à soi-même En face des deux hommes Querelle éprouva tout à coup un malaise, une sorte d'écœurement comme en connaissent les assassins. Le calme et la beauté de Mario le déconcertaient Ils étaient trop grands Le patron du bordel - Norbert - était trop fort Mario aussi. Les lignes du corps de l'un allaient à l'autre, une confusion terrible mêlait les deux musculatures, les deux visages ²⁵

In "Comment jouer *Les Bonnes*", Genet insists that the performance of Madame appear exaggerated through elaborate costume and a deliberate acting style ²⁶ It is possible that Genet intended *Les Bonnes* to be performed by boys, for he writes in *Notre-Dames-Des-Fleurs* that if he were to put on a play in which there were female roles, these roles would be performed by male actors.²⁷ In Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of *Les Bonnes*, he assumes that the three female characters are boys dressed as women. Although there are actual drag queens in *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs* and possibly in *Les Bonnes*, it could be argued that through the exaggerated performance of his principle male and female characters, the characters in the three works are in drag The term 'drag', which is applied to Genet's literature, does not simply entail a man acting as a woman in a stereotypic fashion, but implies a generalized stereotypic enactment of both sexual identities, performed by either men or women

The fact that Genet's characters appear to be in drag disrupts the discourse of naturalness that has been accrued to the performance of masculinity and femininity. Drag has the power to rupture the link between an individual's sex and the performance of that sexual identity According to Ester Newton, when an anatomical-male individual puts on the gestures and costume of a woman, female sexual identity become disconnected from what supposedly

²⁵ Ibid, 31.

²⁶ Jean Genet, "Comment Jouer *Les Bonnes*," *Les Bonnes*, 7, 11.

²⁷ Genet, *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, 253.

determines it, that is genital sex.²⁸ When female gestures are performed by a man, the naturalness of femininity is questioned.²⁹ Through the transvestism of Divine, Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs and possibly the "women" in *Les Bonnes*, Genet constructs a distance from the actual sex of an individual and the performance of femininity. As there do not exist any female characters who put on male gestures, except for Madame Lysiane who desires a masculine expression of her body, the performance of masculinity is less obvious in Genet's works than the performance of femininity. However, by rendering the performance of masculinity so contrived and exaggerated, Genet conveys the idea that the enactment of masculinity is as disconnected from genital sex as femininity.

Genet's "drag shows" question the claim that masculinity and femininity correspond to stable and unified identities. According to Judith Butler, drag does not only sever the link between anatomical sex and the performance of the corresponding gender, but dislodges a third element, gender identity. As Butler states,

If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the

²⁸ Ester Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972) 103. Both Jill Dolan and Sue-Ellen Case argue that male drag reflects how women's roles are socially constructed. See Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Methuen, 1988) 85, and Jill Dolan, "Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles" *Woman and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 2.2 (4): 8.

²⁹ Many feminist theorists would argue that drag and transvestism can not be incorporated positively within feminist theory, as they perceive drag and cross-dressing as degrading to women. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137. According to Nancy M. Henley, the exaggerated femininity of transvestites perpetuates stereotypic conceptions of femininity. See Nancy M. Henley, "The Dance of Life: Posture, Gesture and Body Movement", 141. In an interview in which Hélène Cixous was asked if the "queens" in Genet's literature, through their parody of femininity, enact how femininity has been imposed upon women, Cixous states that transvestism only reveals a disturbance within masculinity. Cixous claims that "A woman cannot recognize herself in a queen." See Hélène Cixous, "Rethinking Differences: An Interview", *Homosexualities and French Literature. Cultural Contexts/Critical Texts*, ed. George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1979) 76-77. Nevertheless, through their appropriation of femaleness, drag queens and transvestites reveal to both women and men that femininity, as it is enacted by women, does not belong to them. (See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137).

gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance.³⁰

Under the guise of unity, the heterosexual discourse of naturalness conceals the distinctness of those elements that compose a given sexual identity

Although the split between gender and sex has been established to distinguish between anatomical sex and the cultural construction of sexual identity, Judith Butler claims that the gender/sex distinction reproduces the rhetoric of naturalness that links anatomical sex with its cultural construction. As gender is regarded as a cultural construction, an individual must assume a gender. As gender is constructed, it is possible for a male or female sexed body to develop the gender of the opposite sex. Nevertheless, Judith Butler argues that the concept of gender presumes that the female body will assume a female gender and vice-versa. Consequently, there exists within the concept of gender the discourse of mimetic identity which assumes a link between gender and anatomy.³¹ The concept of gender partakes in the discourse of naturalness which posits a link between the anatomical sex of the body and the performance of that sex.

Even though Genet's manipulation of sexual identities illustrates their social construction, the inescapable presence of the discourse of naturalness is present throughout his works. In *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, Genet ironically claims that the masculine trait of speaking slang is linked to the male body, when in fact differences in the use of language in males and females are socially enforced.

Les tantes, là-haut avaient leur langage à part. L'argot servait aux hommes. C'était la langue mâle. Ainsi que chez les Caraïbes la langue des hommes, il devenait un attribut sexuel

³⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137.

³¹ Ibid, 137.

secondaire ... Tout le monde pouvait le comprendre, mais seuls le pouvaient parler les hommes qui, à leur naissance, ont reçu en don les gestes, le port des hanches, les jambes et les bras, les yeux, la poitrine, avec lesquels on peut le parler.³²

Although Genet is addressing differences between 'queens' and 'men' in the homosexual community, parallel differences have been isolated between heterosexual men and women. Sociological studies on language and sexual difference have shown that there is a tendency for heterosexual men to speak in a manner that is less polite and formal than women.³³ In both Genet's homosexual community and heterosexual relations between the sexes, differences in language express the asymmetric relation of male dominance. According to Nancy Henley and Barrie Thorne, the fact that men speak more informally than women suggests that they enjoy a certain freedom as a result of their dominant position in society.³⁴

Behind the discourse which determines the criteria for natural female and male behaviour is a power structure. According to Michel Foucault, forms of sexuality which did not conform to the 'economy of reproduction' were cast out and considered perverse and unnatural forms of sexual expression.³⁵ Consequently, sexuality has been divided into the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity. The division of sexuality into two discrete and unified categories conceals the power structure of the 'economy of reproduction'. Foucault states that "... the notion of sex made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations and pleasure and it enables one to make use of this

³² Genet, *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, 64-65.

³³ Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley, "Difference and Dominance: An Overview of Language, Gender and Society," *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, ed. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (Rowley: Newbury, 1975) 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, (trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1980) 36-37.

fictitious unity as a causal principle..”³⁶ Adapting Michel Foucault's theory, Judith Butler claims that the performance of masculinity and femininity, which is considered natural, conforms to the dictates of heterosexual hegemony or compulsory heterosexuality, a term Butler employs that was first coined by Adrienne Rich. Under the guise of naturalness, the power structure that determines the norms of sexual identity is concealed.³⁷ Judith Butler writes “...that one way in which this system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed is through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual dispositions.”³⁸ By producing ‘natural’ heterosexual identity categories in a homosexual community, Genet both discloses the system of compulsory heterosexuality, which produces sexed identities, and the discourse of naturalness that heterosexuality relies upon to dictate identity norms.

In reality, actual individuals can never completely embody masculinity and femininity, as these identities are social constructs.³⁹ In the three works, Jean Genet reveals how the absolute attainment of masculinity or femininity is an impossible goal. The desire to be an absolute male or female is linked to the wish for sovereignty, an impulse which haunts many of Genet's characters. The impossible embodiment of sexual identities emerges through the gap between an individual's actual performance of sex categories and the image of sexuality

³⁶ Ibid., 154.

³⁷ Erving Goffman's discussion of the social production of natural, discrete sexed behaviour bears resemblance to Judith Butler's and Michel Foucault's argument. Through an analysis of how advertisements reproduce relations of domination and submission through physical display such as posture and gaze, Erving Goffman reveals that the performance of sex is not natural. Goffman claims that “Although these displays are part of expressive behaviour they tend to be conveyed and received as if they were natural.” He argues that as gestures of masculinity and femininity have become ritualized to such an extent, they can be lifted out of context and used in advertising to enact relations between the sexes. See Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979)

³⁸ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, *Theatre Journal* 20.3 (1988): 524.

³⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 122.

which the performance attempts to imitate. By appropriating Madame's gestures, language and clothing, Claire in *Les Bonnes* attempts to incarnate Madame's femininity. In the play-acting game of *Les Bonnes* which the maids entitle the 'ceremony', Claire and Solange construct Madame into a sovereign figure. The maid's glorification of Madame emerges in the ceremony in the dialogues between Solange, the fake Claire, and Claire, the fake Madame. In the following diatribe full of both vituperation and worship for Madame, Solange transforms Madame into a god-like figure.

"Vous ne m'intimidez plus. Réveillez le souvenir de votre amant, qu'il vous protège. Je vous hais! Je hais votre poitrine pleine de souffles embaumés. Votre poitrine...d'ivoire! Vos cuisses...d'or! Vos pieds...d'ambre!"⁴⁰

According to Solange, during the night, Claire secretly parades around the apartment in Madame's dresses, playing the queen, Marie-Antoinette. Through her performances, Claire seeks to incarnate the status which Madame's and "Marie Antoinette's" femininity represents for the two maids. The real Madame is not the sovereign feminine figure which Claire desires to become and Solange both despises and admires. Madame is an impoverished version of the fake Madame. The real Madame is neither as beautiful, as flamboyant nor as wicked as Claire's enactment of Madame. The real Madame is only an absolute figure in relation to her maids. Outside the apartment, Madame is submissive to her lover, Monsieur, who is in turn at the mercy of the police. The stature of Madame is parallel to that of Marie-Antoinette which Genet refers to as hollow, plaster statue in *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*.⁴¹ The maids can never attain the power which they seek in adopting the gestures of

⁴⁰ Genet, *Les Bonnes*, 28.

⁴¹ Genet, *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, 154.

'absolute' feminine figures because such women exist purely on the level of image. The homely maids' desire to assume the beauty of Madame can be compared to Divine's desire to maintain a beautiful, youthful and feminine appearance. Both the maid and Divine are imprisoned by the phantasmatic presence of femininity.

The attainment of an absolute sense of masculinity is an equally impossible enterprise in *Querelle de Brest*. Through an exaggerated portrayal of masculinity, Genet constructs absolute male figures only to deflate them in the end. Querelle's strength, beauty and emotional aloofness, renders him the epitome of masculinity in the eyes of Lieutenant Seblon, who fantasizes about surrendering himself to the sailor, Querelle. Nevertheless, Querelle does not fit the mould in which Seblon casts him. By virtue of Querelle's willingness to be sexually dominated by Norbert, Querelle assumes the passive or 'female' position. Furthermore, through Norbert's sexual involvement with Querelle, Norbert's dominant position is eroded. During intercourse with Querelle, Norbert begins to express enjoyment, which in terms of the novel reveals Norbert's femininity. Madame Lysiane's masculine veneer disappears when she expresses unease about the similarities between the identical twins, her lover Robert and his brother, Querelle. Upon seeing the incertitude in his mistress, Robert's glance strips her of her male authority.⁴² Furthermore, Mario's imposing masculinity crumbles in Dédé's presence. As Genet writes, "Pourtant il paraissait étrange à Dédé que la Police parût trembler en face d'un voyou, et pour la première fois il redouta que cette puissance invisible, ideale, qu'il servait et derrière quoi il s'abritait, ne fut composée que de faiblesses humaines."⁴³ Although Lieutenant Seblon has a virile appearance, he is

⁴² Genet, *Querelle de Brest*, 163.

⁴³ Ibid.

haunted by the femininity that lurks within him:

"Il était de belle carrure, large d'épaules, mais il sentait en lui-même la présence de sa féminité contenue quelquefois dans un petit oeuf de mésange, de la grosseur d'une dragée bleue pâle ou rose, et quelquefois débordant pour s'épandre dans tout son corps qu'elle remplissait de lait."⁴⁴

The masculine does not exist absolutely but is continuously being undermined by the feminine

Although Genet reveals that masculinity and femininity can never be incarnated in an absolute sense by actual men and women, he discloses how the actual enactment of sexual identities refers to archetypal models. In the following passage from *Querelle de Brest*, Genet reveals how the masculinity of each individual sailor is viewed in terms of an archetypal sailor that exists solely in the narrator's imagination:

Seule me calme cetter pensée qu'il n'existe qu'un marin: le marin. Et chaque individu que je vois n'est que la momentanée représentation - fragmentaire aussi, et réduite - du Marin. Il en a tous les caractères: la vigueur, la dureté, la beauté, la cruauté, etc. sauf la multiplicité. Chaque matelot qui passe sert à comparer le Marin. Tous les matelots m'apparaissent-ils vivants, présents, à la fois, tous et aucun d'eux séparément ne serait le marin qu'ils composent et qui ne peut être que dans mon imagination, qui ne peut être qu'en moi et par moi. Cette idée m'apaise. Je possède le Marin.⁴⁵

A comparison can be made between the absolute male and female images which Genet's characters attempt to imitate and the archetypal sailor. The maids imitate an absent Madame in the same way that ordinary sailors can be compared to the Sailor, who is a phantasmatic figure.

Through the impossibility of isolating an actual object of reference upon

⁴⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 122

which mimetology depends, Genet questions the nature of reflection. Genet's displacement of the relationship between imitator and imitated can be addressed in light of Jacques Derrida's displacement of the Platonic model of mimesis. Although the Platonic model is only one of the mimetic relationships which Derrida displaces, it can be used as an illustration of the way which mimetic relations are displaced in general in Derridian philosophy. According to Derrida, Plato constructs a hierarchical opposition between speech and writing. As speech extends directly from the voice it is fully present and marks a point of origin. Speech is regarded as the father figure which is life, goodness, being and truth. Memory is on the side of speech.⁴⁶ Writing is inferior to speech because it mimes both speech and memory.⁴⁷ In the Platonic model of mimetology, the imitator can never truly possess the object of reference. Therefore, writing as the opposite of speech occupies the space of death, evil, non-being and falsehood. Although Plato claims that writing appears to facilitate the memory, writing fundamentally corrupts memory by weakening its power through its reliance on writing.⁴⁸ Moreover, writing's ability to mime memory has the potential to undermine the binary division which Plato establishes to separate writing from speech. As memory occupies the same side of the binary oppositions as speech, which is the side of being and truth, memory can not become duplicated or copied without occupying the falseness and non-being of writing. Consequently, Plato establishes a distinction between unrepresentable live memory which possesses an absolute plenitude

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981) 127.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁸ In Plato's philosophy, the status of writing is as ambiguous as that of the 'pharmakon'. Pharmakon, the Greek word for remedy elicits the opposing definitions of cure and disease. By virtue of its ambiguity, the pharmakon operates on both sides of the binary oppositions, which structure Plato's worldview. Due to the pharmakon's potential to cure, the pharmakon represents good; however, as the pharmakon also alters the natural life of disease, it represents evil, as well. See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, 99-100, 109.

of being, and live memory, a substitute, which can be duplicated. As Derrida states, "Memory is thus contaminated by its first substitute: hypomnesis. But what Plato dreams of is a memory with no sign. That is with no supplement."⁴⁹ Derrida reveals that it is difficult to distinguish the supplement from the original. Live memory, which is the repetition of the living truth, and memory, which is facilitated by writing, can become indistinguishable.

The supplement is dangerous because it reveals that the copy can pass for the original.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the supplement illustrates that the division between the being of the original and the non-being of the supplement is not rigid. "...the supplement is not, is not a being (on). It is nevertheless not a simple nonbeing (me on), either. Its slidings slip it out of the simple alternative presence/absence. That is the danger."⁵¹ If writing mimes speech, writing occupies both the being, presence and truth of the original and the non-being, absence and falsehood of imitation. Writing is "the movement, the locus, and the play of opposites."⁵² By miming speech, writing threatens the absolute plenitude which Plato claims speech possesses. Any entity that can be copied does not possess full plenitude of being. In an analysis of the link between iterability and plenitude in Derridian philosophy, Rodolphe Gasché states that "... iterability is the impurity of an absence that from the start, prohibits the full and rigorous attainments of the plenitude of a unit and that in principle subverts its self-identity."⁵³

Derrida's concept of "différance" is linked to the impossibility of plenitude. Derrida argues that the present can only be conceptualized in relation to the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 109.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 127

⁵³ Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986), 213.

past and the future. "Every instant is marked with traces of past and future."⁵⁴ Presence can never be viewed as an actual space of moment but "the effect of a generalized absence of 'différance'".⁵⁵ Although Plato claims that speech is fully present, Derrida reveals how Platonism reverts to the 'scriptural' metaphor to identify individual sounds. As an individual sound can only be conceived in relation to other sounds, speech like writing is marked by difference.⁵⁶ Speech does not exist in itself, but is in reality a supplement for an absent origin.⁵⁷

"Le jeu est dangereux",⁵⁸ says Solange, expressing fear that Madame will discover their secret play-acting ceremony. An analogy could be drawn between the danger in the maids' play and in the play of the supplement, for both threaten the Platonic model of mimetology by subverting the relationship between the referent and its copy. When Claire imitates Madame she fuses the oppositions of original/copy. Claire, as Madame, brings together both the presence of Madame as a copy and the absence of Madame as the original. Furthermore, throughout the play, the distinction between the real Claire or Madame and their fake correspondents is often blurred, leaving the audience in the precarious position of not knowing whether s/he is watching the original or the copy. As *Les Bonnes* opens in the middle of one of the maids' ceremonies, the audience is forced to take the fake maid and fake Madame for the real ones. While tricking his audience, Genet depicts how the copy can substitute for the original. According to Derrida, as an original identity can not be imitated, the original does not possess the plenitude of being necessary for constituting a point of origin. Applying Derrida's claim to *Les Bonnes*, it could be argued that, as Madame's being can be copied, she does not possess the plenitude of being

⁵⁴ Jonathon D. Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Cornell: Cornell UP, 1982) 93.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 94.

⁵⁶ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 163.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 167.

⁵⁸ Genet, *Les Bonnes*, 54.

of an origin. The original in Derrida's philosophy, like the 'real' Madame in Genet's play, always has the status of the copy which is marked by a lack of full presence. In *Les Bonnes*, Genet reveals how Madame's being is marked by difference as she is defined and exists in relation to another, namely, the maid. Through the maid's performance of Madame or Divine's performance of a woman, Genet reveals the iterability of the ideal archetype of femininity. Consequently, when the maid puts on the feminine, she refers to an 'originary' archetype of femininity, Madame. Furthermore, the sailors in *Querelle de Brest* are compared to the archetypal sailor which can be regarded as the quintessential male figure. If Genet's manipulation of identity is approached from a Derridian perspective, it could be argued that the enactment of femininity or masculinity which appears to refer to an original and ideal concept of gendered identity, in fact refers to a false original or a non-original original, as both masculinity and femininity can never be absolutely embodied.

In any given mimetic relation, the source or originary point of reference is a supplement.⁹⁹ Although Rousseau establishes a distinction between the origin and the supplement, in *De la grammatologie*, Derrida displaces Rousseau's distinction and unveils a supplement at the source. By combining the two meanings of "supplement", which are addition and replacement, Derrida is able to dismantle Rousseau's position. As Rousseau takes "supplement" to mean only addition, he claims that the supplement is always exterior to the source which possesses full presence.¹⁰⁰ By applying the second meaning of "supplement" to Rousseau's theory, Derrida argues that the "supplement" could only be an addition to and a replacement of an original source if the source

⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 304.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 167.

itself were marked by a lack of plenitude.⁶¹

By positing a supplement at the source, Derrida displaces the binary oppositions of being/appearance and truth/falsehood which govern mimetic relationships that are based upon the imitations of an originary presence. Traditionally, mimetology claims that the original object of imitation incarnates truth and exists in itself whereas the copies, as representations of the original, reproduce only falsehood and appearance. By unveiling the origin as an absent presence and revealing that the supplement can replace the origin, Derrida disrupts the binary framework that structures mimetology. In Derridian terms, the process of reflection can no longer be regarded as a false imitation of a true original source but rather blurs the distinction between the binary opposition of true and false while simultaneously maintaining the division. The logic which Derrida employs to illustrate the play of differences assumes a myriad of forms, such as the logic of the pharmakos in "Plato's Pharmacy," of the hymen in "The Double Session," and of the supplement in *Of Grammatology*, of which all three offer a similar method for dealing with binary oppositions. Derrida describes this method as "an operation that both sows confusion between opposites and stands between the opposites "at once."⁶² As Derrida reveals that both the 'origin' and its copies are in fact copies, a true and complete source of imitation vanishes. Consequently, the simulacrum, and absent origin, can be said to be neither true nor false, and neither present nor absent, real nor fake but rather operate within these oppositions, blurring the distinction between them without ever going beyond them completely or fully embodying them.

Derrida's concept of the absent origin and of the play of differences can

⁶¹ Gashé, *The Tain of the Mirror*, 208.

⁶² Derrida, *Dissemination*, 213.

be applied to Genet's texts to question the genesis of archetypal sex categories that his characters strive to embody. As it has been illustrated that Genet's characters imitate archetypal figures that are not fully present but are absent origins, it could be argued that it is the actual imitation of archetypal figures that constructs the original source. The sailor's performance of masculinity, through identifications with the ideal sailor, or the maids' performance of femininity, through identifications with an idealized Madame, constructs the ideal which is supposedly being imitated. As the criteria for the "perfect" man or woman are actually constructed bodily through the performances by actual "imperfect" men and women, Genet reveals the social construction of original identities. Once the actual genesis of original identities is unravelled and it becomes apparent that 'true' original sources are produced by false imitation, then the notion of true and false identities becomes meaningless. The 'truth' of an identity lies in its performance. In light of Derrida, the displacement of the origin elicits a confusion between such binary divisions as true/false, real/apparent and natural/artificial. Once these binary divisions become suspect so does identity based upon mimetic identification, for such identification is dependent upon binary differentiation. When Genet's characters assume another identity, they are not hiding their true identity with a false one but are performing an identity that can not be neatly classified as either simply true or false. When the maids perform 'Madame', they are not simply assuming a false identity but are also constructing an identity through their performance. Furthermore, Divine's female identity is not simply a masquerade which she assumes to conceal her true male nature. Genet reveals that when Divine puts on female gestures, these gestures are not merely a disguise but a becoming female.

On pourrait croire que, revenant ainsi spontanément à sa véritable nature, Divine était un mâle maquillé, echevelé de gestes postiches; mais il ne s'agit pas de ce phénomène de la

langue maternelle à laquelle on a recours aux heures graves ..
 Sa féminité n'était pas qu'une mascarade. Mais pour penser
 "femme" en plein, ses organes la gênaient. Penser, c'est faire
 un acte.⁶³

Divine's femininity is neither completely true nor completely false but is as 'true' and as 'false' as the femininity performed by anatomical females. Femininity is false in the sense that as an original identity or object of reference to be imitated, it can not be isolated, but it is true in the sense that it is performed. Femininity like masculinity is a social construct whose "truth" lies in its performance by actual men and women. As Genet deviates from an identity construct that assumes the rigidity of binary oppositions, his works illuminate Judith Butler's claim that identity operates in between the polarities of binary oppositions, a position which underlies Derridian logic. Although Judith Butler argues that the way in which an individual performs her/his sex is determined by the dictates of 'compulsory heterosexuality', the body is not merely a passive recipient of its identity. Sexual identities are neither completely determined nor arbitrary but function within the polarities of determination and free will. Although men and women perform their sex according to the heterosexual criteria of natural and ideal sexual behaviour, through adherence to gender norms, each individual is participating in the production of sexual stereotypes.⁶⁴ Through the body performance of masculinity and femininity, the socially constructed masculine 'superiority' and feminine 'submissiveness' is corporeally perpetuated. According to Erving Goffman, gender display does not merely reflect the asymmetric relation between the sexes but rather, "These expressions constitute the hierarchy they are the shadow and the substance."⁶⁵

Genet illustrates that sex categories do not refer to natural and true

⁶³ Genet, *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, 257-258.

⁶⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136.

⁶⁵ Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, 6.

identities but rather the criteria for natural and ideal sexual expression are constructed by the actual performance of sexual identities in accordance to the dictates of heterosexual hegemony. Nevertheless, the mechanism or discourse that constructs the natural and ideal expression of gendered identity, prevails and imposes a real and oppressive effect upon the lives of men and women. In Genet's works two forces are continuously at play - the simultaneous dismantling and maintaining of essential concepts of masculinity and femininity. Although Genet deconstructs the categories of masculinity and femininity, his works are obsessively concerned with maintaining sexual stereotypes. Through his seemingly contradictory stance, Genet reveals that, although masculinity and femininity are constructs, they continue to function as essences within society.

Because of Genet's ambivalent portrayal of sexual categories, his works can be approached from an essentialist constructivist perspective. Are not essentialism and constructivism antithetical to one another? According to Diana Fuss, essentialism lurks within constructivism, a theoretical stand which includes Derridian deconstruction. Fuss claims that "...any radical constructionism can only be built on the foundations of a hidden essentialism."⁶⁶ In particular the idea of contradiction or 'différence' in Derridian logic surfaces as the given or "essence" of deconstruction. Contradiction is at the center of deconstruction and is the prerequisite for its operation.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Fuss reveals that the claim, that essentialism is always reactionary, is an essentialist claim as it assumes that essentialism has an essence.⁶⁸ Moreover, she argues that Derrida himself would agree that a given theory can never completely

⁶⁶ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 13

⁶⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 21.

transgress metaphysics. As western metaphysics is based upon the binary opposition of essence/accident, essentialism will always emerge.⁶⁹ As social constructivism can not escape essentialism, it is possible to speak about an essentialist deconstruction.

When essentialism and deconstruction are combined, the function of essentialism is radically altered. Traditionally feminists have been opposed to essentialism because it has been used to explain social conditions in terms of biological givens. However, once essentialism is incorporated in a deconstructivist stance it can not be for the purpose of maintaining universal essences, for deconstruction illustrates how all concepts including essences are historically contingent. Fuss draws a distinction between falling into essentialism or deploying it strategically. Falling into an essentialism would entail a return to universal categories, whereas deploying essentialism strategically would maintain certain "essences" in the interest of those who have a political investment in their maintenance while simultaneously recognizing that these essences are mere constructs.⁷⁰ Although Genet eradicates masculinity and femininity as universal essences, he reveals that these essences continue to operate. As the discourse that produces essences actively represses certain groups in society, it is not in their interest to have these essences dismissed as non-constructs. Essences are to be maintained not for their inherent value as they are mere signs, but rather because of the discursive relations which produce them.

The socially-constructed precept of male dominance imposes actual restraints upon the lives of women and, in particular in Genet's works, the lives of men. In both *Querelle de Brest* and *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, any

⁶⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 20.

biologically-male individual whose body elicits 'femininity' becomes an object of contempt. Ironically, in the largely homosexual realm of Genet's novels, only effeminate men are labelled 'homosexual.' An equation is made between homosexuality and femininity in Genet's works. Although most of the men in Genet's works engage in homosexual acts, only those who are sexually passive are considered homosexuals.⁷¹ The dominant homosexual possesses the power of the masculine. As Mignon, the dominant male figure in *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, says, "Un mâle qui en baise un autre est un double mâle."⁷² Although Mignon realizes later on that his self-proclaimed absolute male authority is false, through Mignon's declaration Genet illustrates that the myth of male dominance prevails. This myth oppresses not only women but also those men within the homosexual community who can not pass for "male." The passive homosexual and the homosexual who outwardly flaunts his femininity is despised by the other 'masculine' homosexuals because they represent the stigma of inferiority that homosexuals must endure in a heterosexual hegemony.⁷³ The asymmetric binary opposition of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual are intertwined in Genet's work, thus revealing that the maleness that is privileged in the homosexual community is the masculinity of the heterosexual world which entails the subordination of woman and 'unnatural' men. Through the outside world's reaction to the femininity and the homosexuality of the drag queen, Divine, Genet brings forth the oppressive power of masculine and heterosexual dominance. Genet writes, "Le café disparut et Divine fut métamorphosée en une de ces bêtes peintes sur les

⁷¹ Ester Newton claims that in certain homosexual communities a man who is sexually dominant can be considered 'normal', that is not homosexual. See Newton, *Mother Camp*, 102.

⁷² Genet, *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, 284.

⁷³ The stigma that is conveyed in Genet's works has been elaborated upon in sociological studies of homosexuality. See Newton, *Mother Camp*, 108. and Kenneth Plummer, "Some Interaction Problems of the Homosexual," *Sexual Stigma: An Interactionist Account* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975) 175.

murailles - chimères ou griffons - car un consommateur, malgré lui murmura un mot magique en pensant à elle: - Pédérasque.⁷⁴

As a result of the stigma that the label of homosexuality carries, most of the homosexuals in Jean Genet's works conceal their identity. All of Genet's male characters, except for those whose gestures are feminine like Divine's, Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs' and the girl-queens', conceal their homosexuality by performing masculine gestures which are also the gestures of straight men.⁷⁵ Given that masculinity is a body performance, it is not only homosexual men who put on the gestures of the straight male but also heterosexuals who must adopt the gestures that conform to a heterosexual portrayal of 'true' and 'natural' masculinity. The similarity between the expression of masculinity in the gay community and the straight community is exposed in *Querelle de Brest*. The fusion of the homosexual and heterosexual realms becomes apparent through Genet's ironic disclosure that none of the characters in the novel are homosexuals except for lieutenant Seblon, when, in fact, almost all of the men in the novel engage in homosexual practices except for Seblon, whose homosexual encounters remain on the level of fantasy. Unlike Divine or Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs, the homosexuals in *Querelle de Brest* are not homosexuals because they perform as 'straight' men, except in a few secret moments of sexual contact when they can express their desire and affection for another man. It could be argued that the exaggerated display of masculinity in *Querelle de Brest* is distinctly homosexual.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, through the charade of masculinity in *Querelle de Brest* Genet discloses that the body's performance of masculinity, which is defined in terms of heterosexual norms, is

⁷⁴ Genet, *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, 41.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of how homosexuals are forced to conceal their sexual orientation and at times play 'straight' in order to function successfully in a heterosexual society, see Plummer, "Some Interaction Problems of the Homosexual", 194 and Newton, *Mother Camp* 108.

⁷⁶ Newton, *Mother Camp*, 102.

neither a biological given nor an ideal construct but is a sexual expression that is put on by both homosexual and heterosexual men alike.

The failure to present one's body in accordance to the dictates of heterosexual hegemony bears punitive consequences.⁷⁷ Jean Genet demonstrates how the feminine man is punished by society. As already mentioned, Divine finds herself ostracized as a result of her feminine performance of her biologically-male body. Others, however, receive harsher sentences. In *Querelle de Brest*, Querelle, who is a homosexual himself but does not appear overtly homosexual or feminine, murders his seducer the Armenian, Joachim, because he flaunts his homosexuality through a bodily expression of femininity. Querelle, who strives throughout the novel to maintain the position of the absolute male figure, feels his murderous actions are justified. Speaking for Querelle, Genet writes of the murdered man.

Si c'est cela un pédé, ce n'est pas un homme. Ça ne pèse pas lourd. C'est un petit chat, un bouvreuil, un faon, un orvet, une libellule dont la fragilité même est provocatrice et précisément exagérée afin qu'elle attire inévitablement la mort.⁷⁸

The desire to conform to a feminine ideal becomes an oppressive impulse in *Les Bonnes*. As masculinity is virtually absent in the play, with the exception of a few allusions to the male figures of Monsieur and the milkman, Genet establishes a hierarchical relationship between two kinds of femininity within the closed environment of Madame's apartment. Rather than elaborating upon the male/female relationship between Madame and Monsieur, Genet concentrates upon the asymmetric relationship between the power of

⁷⁷ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." 522.

⁷⁸ Genet, *Querelle De Brest*, 217.

Madame's overt display of femininity and the impotent and impoverished femininity of the maids. Consequently, within the context of the play and specifically Madame's apartment, Madame occupies the dominant position typically held by a male figure. Although the maids are women,⁷⁹ they do not possess the gestures of overt femininity nor the artifice, such as dress, jewellery and make-up, which are essential for producing a sexualized and desirable female object. In "Comment Jouer les Bonnes", Genet comments upon the appearance of the maids:

Leur visage, au début, est donc marqué des rides aussi subtiles que les gestes ou qu'un de leurs cheveux. Elles n'ont ni cul ni seins provocants: elles pourraient enseigner la piété dans une institution chrétienne.⁸⁰

Madame represents the femininity that the maids desire and want to become. The maids, and in particular Claire, can never incarnate Madame's femininity because Madame herself does not embody it. The power of Madame's femininity, which generates from the maid's idealization of Madame's beauty and wickedness, exists only in the confines of the apartment. Claire's desire to become the idealized woman that the maids envision is their mistress is both an imprisoning and impossible goal. Similarly, in *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs*, Divine is plagued by the impossible desire to remain a feminine beauty. Although, for Genet, femininity can not be fixed as an ideal or natural construct, the discourse of idealized and natural female identity exercises a repressive force upon those men and women who are compelled to adhere to an

⁷⁹ Even if the maids' role are played by boys, the portrayal of the servants' femininity would probably not be different than if they were played by women. Casting boys to play the two maids would nonetheless emphasize that femininity is put on and performed.

⁸⁰ Genet, "Comment Jouer les Bonnes", *Les Bonnes*, 8. Genet adds in "Comment Jouer Les Bonnes" that during the performance, the maids gradually become more beautiful. Although he does not provide an explanation for the gradual amelioration of the maids' appearance, it could be argued that as the maids attempt to both incarnate and destroy Madame, they begin to assume her beauty.

archetypal portrayal of the feminine.

Masculinity and femininity in Genet's realm become corporeal gestures which can be appropriated and manipulated by both genital-sexed men and genital-sexed women. Nevertheless, the system of compulsory heterosexuality, which operates in Genet's works, ensures that men will perform masculine gestures and women will perform feminine gestures by punishing those individuals who deviate from normative sexual behaviour. The hierarchical structure of heterosexuality which privileges masculinity above femininity is disclosed in Genet's works. Furthermore, his works illustrate how the male dominance of heterosexuality extends into homosexual interactions. While Genet unleashes sexual identity from any reference to an original, fixed and true nature, he simultaneously depicts how individuals strive to embody archetypal constructs of the absolute and perfect male and female figure. As Genet's works unveil that it is individuals' performance of their sexuality that constructs archetypal identities, the quest to imitate the perfect woman or man becomes a futile and imprisoning endeavour.

Race, Ritual and Play in *Les Nègres*

"Le nègre n'est pas. Pas plus que le Blanc"

- Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*

Genet questions the concept of race as a viable mark of differentiation in *Les Nègres*. Although Genet presents both blacks and whites in a stereotypic light, he reveals simultaneously that racial identities are not fixed and separate categories. Genet portrays how black and white identities are socially constructed and do not therefore, correspond to a fixed and absolute essence of blackness or whiteness. Once racial identity is unleashed from a signified, what constitutes race becomes the actual performance by individuals of a given racial identity. Judith Butler's argument, that sexual identities are performed, can be applied to the issue of racial identity. As Butler reveals that the performance of masculinity and femininity is determined by a compulsory heterosexuality, Genet portrays how the performance of blackness is dictated by the white conception of what is black identity. Even though the difference between black and white identity is dissolved in *Les Nègres*, in the same play Genet emphasizes their distinctness. While Genet deconstructs the concept of race by eradicating differences between blacks and whites, he simultaneously maintains racial differentiation to reveal the oppressive effects of essentialist-based concepts of racial identity. Through the paradoxical portrayal of racial differentiation in *Les Nègres*, Genet illustrates how the effects of stereotypic and essentialist-based concepts of black and white identity prevail even though racial differentiation as a means to separate blacks and whites is a social construction maintained by white hegemony and not based on actual biological

differences.

The writings of various theorists of race relations such as Frantz Fanon, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston A. Baker, Timothy Maliquelim Simone, Jr., Diana Fuss, Joyce A. Joyce, Anthony Appiah, Bell Hooks, Marilyn Frye and Angela Y. Davis will be used to address the issue of racial differentiation in *Les Nègres*. Each of these theorists deals with race relations from a particular context. In *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Fanon deals with the problem of race from the perspective of the Antillian man and woman, under white French colonization. The writings of Gates, Baker, Joyce, Appiah, Fuss and Simone deal with issues of race in American society. Hooks, Frye and Davis focus on the interconnection of racism and sexism in American society. Although *Les Nègres* is written in French, the play does not deal explicitly with any particular racial situation but portrays the racism and oppression that blacks experience in a society where whites dominate. *Les Nègres* portrays the issue of race in a manner that reflects diverse theoretical discourses on black and white relations. The following analysis addresses those issues of race relations that could be applied to various social contexts rather than focusing on a particular group.

The following reading of racial identity in Jean Genet's *Les Nègres* deviates from a purely Sartrean model. Nevertheless, the issue of identity which underlines Genet's play has been largely approached from a Sartrean perspective.¹ A link has been made between the repeated ceremonies in the play and Genet's quest for being as laid out by Sartre. Genet's characters, together with the author himself, are forced to partake in repetitive gestures in search of their being only to find that their goal leads to nothingness. Although a great deal of Sartre's analysis of Genet does facilitate an understanding of

¹ For an outline of the major critics of Genet who have been influenced by Sartre, see Una Chaudhuri, *No Man's Stage: A Semiotic Study of Jean Genet's Major Plays* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986) 1-2.

how the ceremonies illuminate Genet's concept of identity, Sartre's theory, if applied faithfully to Genet's theatre, does not take into account the complexities of racial identity.

Since Sartre's portrayal of Genet seems to be ever-present in a great deal of critical works on Genet, it is necessary to reveal how a reading of *Les Nègres* could convey the Sartrian concept of identity. Before the play can be analyzed from a Sartrian perspective, it is imperative to provide an understanding of Sartre's theory, which has enabled critics to reduce Genet's ceremonies to empty gestures.²

According to Sartre, when Genet's foster parents accuse him of being a thief, Genet is radically altered. From that moment on Genet's being is imposed upon him.³ He first becomes conscious of who he is through the words of another. Being and language become one.⁴ Both Genet's essence and language become the property of the other. From the moment that he is named a thief, he ceases to exist in himself and is dead.⁵ Genet incarnates the world of nothingness and non-being which is opposed to the realm of the condemner, the other who contains being. The moment that Genet is named a thief marks his entry into a world organized in a dualistic framework which opposes Evil, which is nothingness, non-being and objectivity, and Good, where being and subjectivity lie.

Genet decides to consciously will to be that which is thrown upon him in order to capture his being.⁶ By willing to be a thief, Genet desires to be a non-being. He is consequently throwing together two incompatible world systems,

² Sylvie Debevec Henning, *Genet's Ritual Play* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1982) 41.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Comedien et Martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952) 43.

⁴ Ibid., 45.

⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁶ Ibid., 79.

the realm of the Good and of Evil. A project which is doomed to fail.⁷ If by actually stealing or murdering, Genet does assume the evil nature that has been projected upon him, he merely reinforces how the good perceives him. To capture his essence through crime, his criminal acts must remain imaginary. A true crime is really a fake crime.⁸ By performing an imaginary crime, the criminal bestows being upon his gesture for an instant before it vanishes into non-being, as the crime never in fact occurred.⁹ Genet is caught up in the whirligigs of Good and Evil which send him spinning from one side of the dialectic to the other only to return to where he started.¹⁰

Before Sartre's theory can be applied to *Les Nègres*, it is necessary to relate Genet's play. As the play opens, a group of blacks dance a minuet around a draped catafalque. Then Archibald, a black man and the master of ceremonies, introduces the blacks to the members of the white court, who are mounted on a platform. The members of the court, who are actually black actors wearing white masks, impersonate archetypal figures - a queen and her valet, a missionary, a judge and a governor. All the blacks, except Ville de Saint-Nazaire, are gathered before the court to perform the ceremony they enact every night - the rape-murder of a white woman. Before the ceremony begins, Archibald sends Ville de Saint-Nazaire away as he is supposed to assist in a trial and execution of a black traitor offstage. There is a potential anti-white revolution brewing in the world outside the play realm.

The ceremony begins as Diouf takes on the role of the white female victim by putting on a blond wig, white mask and full skirt. Village, who assumes the role of the rapist/murderer, plays at the seduction and rape of the

⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁸ Ibid., 90.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 313.

white woman. The actual "murder" occurs offstage. The white court comes down from its platform and attempts to avenge the black realm, which is named "Africa", for the murder of the white woman. In turn, each of the members of the court is assassinated by the blacks. The black actors who are playing the court remove their masks and all the characters exit, except Village and Vertu who express their love for one another. In the final part of the play, the blacks dance a minuet to Mozart's Don Giovanni around the catafalque, which the play earlier revealed is an illusionary corpse.

An analogy can be drawn between Genet's position in society as postulated by Sartre and the lot of the blacks in *Les Nègres*. Being separated by virtue of skin colour from the white society, the blacks incarnate everything that is not white. Like the good society which rejected Genet, the whites are synonymous with light, goodness, beauty, love whereas the blacks are pushed into the realm of Evil where darkness, sin, ugliness and hate prevail.¹¹ While Archibald introduces the blacks to the court, he reveals the asymmetric relation that determines the characteristics of each group. As Archibald says, "Vous le voyez, mesdames, messieurs, comme vous avez vos lis et vos roses, pour vous servir nous utiliserons nos fards d'un beau noir luisant."¹² The hierarchical binary opposition which divides the white world from the black world emerges in Genet's integration of stereotypic categories of white and black attributes that exist in the French language. Frantz Fanon, in *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, illustrates how hierarchical racial differences are constructed in French. As Fanon says, "Le Noir davantage, pour la bonne raison qu'il est noir. Ne dit-on pas, dans la symbolique, la Blanche Justice, la Blanche Vérité, la Blanche Vierge? Nous avons connu un Antillais qui, parlant d'un autre, disait: 'Son

¹¹ Jean Genet, *Les Nègres: Clownerie et Pour Jouer les Nègres* (Paris: Marc Barbezat-L'Arbalète, 1963) 44.

¹² Ibid., 24.

corps est noir, sa langue est noire...' ¹³ The blacks in *Les Nègres* are subjugated by this hierarchical binary system set up by the whites. Furthermore, the essence of a black man or black woman is imposed upon him or her from the outside. The blacks can only seize their being through the other. Like Genet, the blacks are caught in a master/slave relationship in which their being is imposed upon them

As Genet's imaginary crimes are ceremonies he performs in order to be a thief, the blacks perform their ceremony of rape-murder in order to be black. Archibald reveals the goal of the blacks' criminal act when he says, "Le tragique sera dans la couleur noire! C'est elle que vous chérirrez, rejoindrez, mériterez. C'est elle qu'il faudra gagner." ¹⁴ The blacks' goal is to be black according to the image of blackness that has been cast upon them.

While the ceremony is intended to deliver the blacks from their imposed identity, it merely sends them spinning in Sartre's whirligigs. Being part of the realm of evil, the blacks incarnate non-being, nothingness and appearance. The ceremony of rape and murder of the white woman is merely illusionary. The murder never occurs and the supposed victim is a black man playing a white woman. The action of the blacks is reduced to mere illusion and collapses back into the realm of nothingness where the whites have confined them.

Sartre's theory appears problematic because it reduces the entirety of Genet's creative endeavours to the fulfillment of one single and individual goal. ¹⁵ Nevertheless, it should not be completely dismissed. Elements of Sartre's theory cohere with *Les Nègres*. It emerges clearly in the play that black identity has been imposed upon blacks and that the essence of a black or a

¹³ Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952) 147.

¹⁴ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 30.

¹⁵ Chaudhuri, *No Man's Stage*, 2.

white person is determined by their outward appearance. Although the goal of the ceremony clearly invokes the Sartrean idea that the blacks' game is an attempt to become the identity that has been imposed upon them, it is questionable whether the ceremony merely leads the blacks to nothingness. The principle problem with applying Sartre's critique of Genet is that it does not take into account the theatricality of the play.¹⁶ The conclusion that Genet's ceremonies lead to nothingness is concretely negated in the theatre. As Chaudhuri asks, "For how can nothingness, and its processive antecedent, negation, be evoked and implemented in the intensely physical medium that is theater?"¹⁷ In order to illustrate how the issue of identity and in particular racial identity in Genet's plays entails more than an enactment of nothingness, it is necessary to reveal how the ceremony of murder, the micro-play, is a failed ritual within the actual ritualized theatre of the work as a whole.

Although critics have called the ceremony in *Les Nègres* a ritual, it will be illustrated that the blacks' ceremony is in fact a failed ritual. It was Sartre who first remarked upon the ritualistic nature of Genet's theatre, by referring to the maid's ceremony in *Les Bonnes* as a black mass.¹⁸ Defining the blacks' ceremony as a ritual is problematic because of the myriad of meanings which this term evokes.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the concept of ritual can be narrowed down to entail certain common characteristics which appear to surface in the blacks' ceremony. A ritual is often mimetic in the sense that it refers to an original act. It is often comprised of repetitive gestures that bear symbolic meaning. The goal of a ritual is usually the reaffirmation of communal values. Finally, the space of

¹⁶ Ibid., 10

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Pantheon, 1963).

¹⁹ Richard C. Webb, "Ritual, Theatre and Jean Genet's *Les Nègres*", *Theatre Journal*, 42. 4 (1974): 447.

the ritual becomes sacred and separate from the profane.²⁰

The ceremony in *Les Nègres* is riddled with paradox. Although it appears to be based upon a ritualistic form, it simultaneously rejects its underlying structure. The blacks' ceremony does not remain sacred despite Archibald's insistence upon maintaining a clear division between the realm of the ceremony, the sacred space, and the profane area outside the ceremony. Throughout the play, various characters do not follow the ritual set out by Archibald and consequently defy the sacredness of the rite. As Archibald says when Neige eats some of the flowers that are part of the performance, "Votre geste d'enfant gâtée n'appartenait pas au rite."²¹ He says later on to Village who tries to act independently, "C'est à moi qu'il faut obéir. Et au texte que nous avons mis au point."²² Despite Archibald's attempts, the black actors do not fully adhere to the fixed procedures of the rite and consequently violate its sacredness.

Not only is the ceremony in *Les Nègres* not completely sacred, it also does not imitate an original act. According to Una Chaudhuri, the blacks' ceremony of rape and murder is transformed into a ritual because it mimics an original incident.²³ Nevertheless, it could be argued that the crime in the ceremony only appears to refer to an original murder. Before the ceremony actually begins, the actors speak about the catafalque that is on stage. Each night, the ceremony demands a new white corpse as a prop for the murder ceremony. Village states that hidden under the drapery is the body of a street woman that he murdered the night before. During the ceremony Village does not enact the murder he just committed but an entirely different incident. In the

²⁰ These aspects of ritual can be found in René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. R. Gregory (1977; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979).

²¹ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 29.

²² Ibid., 31.

²³ Chaudhuri, *No Man's Stage*, 107.

rite. Village and the other actors act out the murder of a young white woman, Marie. The blacks' ceremony does not mimic an original murder but produces new yet nonmimetic murders.

The ceremony fails as a ritual through its inability to realize the sacrificial murder enacted to reaffirm the social order which in terms of the play is the separation of black and white identities. According to René Girard, the purpose of the repeated ritualized murder of a sacrificial victim is the liberation of society from a state of non-differentiation which constantly threatens the social order. The sacrifice establishes a distinction between the community and the victim. According to Girard, clear distinctions between identities prevent social chaos. Even though his theory reveals that the difference which the scapegoat establishes is a fake one, as the victim is derived from the society itself, he claims that the scapegoat's death can prevent an eruption of non-differentiation from disrupting the social order.²⁴ The ceremony in Genet's play reveals the inherent contradiction in employing a scapegoat to establish distinctions between identities. The fake white woman, who is the sacrificial victim in the ceremony, can be compared to a Girardian victim by virtue of the fact that "she" originates from the black world and is projected into the white world. As the ritual is a failure in *Les Nègres*, the goal of the sacrifice can not be attained. Genet's sacrificial ceremony is unable to bring about a state of differentiation between the two races.²⁵ Furthermore, the sacrificial victim, Diouf, is never portrayed as clearly part of the outside realm, the white world. As Diouf wears a white mask during the ceremony, he is neither completely black nor white. After the ceremony, he appears in the realm outside the black realm where, still masked, he remains an ambivalent figure.

²⁴ Debevec Henning, *Genet's Ritual Play*, 82.

²⁵ This interpretation of Genet's *Les Nègres* has been adapted from Debevec Henning's analysis of *Les Bonnes*. See Debevec Henning, *Genet's Ritual Play*, 43,50.

An illustration of how the sacrificial victim actually becomes a nexus for the simultaneous positioning of opposing identities is revealed by Derrida's discussion of the pharmakos, the scapegoat in ancient Greek purification rites in Athens. Whenever a calamity overtook the city, some of the city's outcasts were sacrificed to purify and liberate the community from the external evil. The Athenians maintained a group of outcasts within the city for sacrificial purposes. In order for the scapegoats to purify the city, they were cast out. Nevertheless, the victims themselves originated from the city. Derrida reveals that the scapegoat ritual can not establish a distinction between boundaries but rather reinforces the play of opposing realms.²⁶

The ceremony of the pharmakos is thus played out on the boundary line between inside and outside which has as its function ceaselessly to trace and retrace. Intra muros/extra muros. The origin of difference and division, the pharmakos represents evil both introjected and projected.²⁷

The pharmakos is an operation that both creates confusion between opposites while maintaining their separation. The undifferentiated yet differentiated state which emerges from Derrida's analysis of the scapegoat surfaces not only in the play's sacrificial victim, Diouf, but in all the characters on stage. By virtue of their white masks, the members of the court, who are in reality blacks representing the white world, both fuse together and separate the two 'races'. The paradox emerges visually in the play. As Genet writes in *Les Nègres*, the members of the court are supposed to wear masks that will only partially conceal their blackness. The portrayal of whiteness is not absolute. Sartre reveals how in Genet's realm the dominant powers are equally victims of

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago U of Chicago P, 1981) 133.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

appearances as those they dominate. While referring to a relationship between a dominant and passive homosexual in Genet's fiction, Sartre claims that the dominant one's authority is undermined because his position is dependent upon the submissive nature of the other.²⁸ The idea that dominant power is not absolute emerges powerfully in the play when Neige cries out to Diouf, who is dressed up as a white woman, and says, "Mais qu'est-ce qu je vois couler sur vos bas de coton noir? C'était donc vrai, Seigneur Jésus, que derrière le masque d'un Blanc pris au piège tremble de frousse un pauvre Nègre."²⁹ The 'real' blacks in the play, those without masks are not completely black either. As the ceremony fails, the blacks are unable to be totally black and therefore differentiate themselves from the whites.

Blackness is an identity that is never in fact present. As Genet says, "Mais qu'est-ce que c'est donc un noir? Et d'abord c'est de quelle couleur?"³⁰ Through the play of masks and the failure of the ritual, Genet reveals that absolute presence or the possibility of being either black or white, as defined by the white world, is unattainable. The goal of the ceremony as a means to establish fixed identities can be viewed in light of Derrida's claim that what is sought in establishing presence is the absence of play. As Genet has done, Derrida reveals that play is inevitable. Derrida illustrates how the concept of presence actually depends upon play. In order to illustrate how fixed presence can not escape fluctuation, Derrida demonstrates how the concept of a centered structure owes its fundamental immobility to the concept of play. The center of a structure, by organizing the coherence of that structure, permits the slippage of its elements inside the structure's form. The center also closes off the element of play which it opens up and makes possible. The center is not merely within a

²⁸ Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 129.

²⁹ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 65.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

structure but lies both within and outside it.³¹ The coherence or fixed nature of a structure is grounded in the play of the center. According to Derrida, the center has received different forms or names in the history of the West of which one of them is being as presence. Derrida reveals that being through its reliance on the concept of the fixed center can not refer to an absolute presence.³²

The idea expressed in *Les Nègres* that black or white identity does not refer to an essence emerges in a great deal of the critical literature on racial identity. Genet's portrayal of race mirrors Barbara Johnson's stance. Adopting a Derridian perspective, Johnson claims that when black and white identity are juxtaposed, neither 'race' can be conceived as pure presence or pure inside. She reveals that black and white identity only exist in relation to the other and not in terms of each 'race'. The differences between the races becomes merely an "artificial ornamental surface."³³ Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that races do not exist as viable marks of differentiation but are created by language.³⁴ Gates claims that race is an arbitrary signifier which does not refer to an actual signified.³⁵ The idea that blackness refers to an absent signified emerges in *Les Nègres* at the end of the play when Archibald addresses the court who are now unmasked and discloses that black identity can refer to any quality that is demanded of it.

Le temps n'est pas encore venu de présenter des
spectacles sur de nobles données. Mais peut-être

³¹ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences", *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 279.

³² Ibid., 280.

³³ Barbara Johnson, "Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston", *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985, 1986) 327.

³⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Talkin' That Talk." *Race*, *Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985, 1986) 402.

³⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Writing, 'Race' and the Difference it Makes", *Race' Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1985, 1986) 5.

soupçonne-t-on ce que peut dissimuler cette architecture de vide et de mots. Nous sommes ce qu'on veut que nous soyons, nous le serrons donc jusqu'au bout absurdement.³⁶

Both Genet and Gates reveal that racial differences are constructed. In "Writing, 'Race' and the Difference it Makes", Gates cites an example to reveal how language has created natural differences between races, for in 1850, in the United States, the natural differences between blacks and whites were artificially laid out.³⁷ Gates argues that it is impossible to base racial differences upon any criteria such as language, biology or a common history. Nevertheless, sanctioned by scientific truth, the concept of race persists as a true mark of differentiation between people.³⁸ Whites and Blacks are not always as distinct from one another as is the nomenclature used to differentiate these two 'races'. Marilyn Frye argues that there are many people whose skin is white, such as certain Black, Mexican, Puerto Rican or Mohawk individuals and yet they would not be considered white by the average 'white' North American. Although an individual can have very pale skin, if s/he has some non-European ancestry, such as African or Indian, s/he is not classified as being white.³⁹ In *Les Nègres* Genet reveals how the denotation of white and black does not in fact refer to actual skin colour. After Diouf is killed, while playing a white woman, he reappears in the white world. When Bobo asks Diouf if he is white, Diouf's answer reveals that the term whiteness is not a true signifier of white-skinned people. Diouf replies, "Il faut d'abord vous dire qu'ils mentent ou qu'ils se trompent: ils ne sont pas blancs, mais roses, ou jaunâtres..."⁴⁰

³⁶ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 122.

³⁷ Gates, Jr. "Writing, 'Race' and the Difference it Makes" 3.

³⁸ Ibid., 2-6.

³⁹ "On Being White: Thinking Toward A Feminist Understanding of Race and Race Supremacy" Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedman, California: Crossing Press, 1983) 113-114.

⁴⁰ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 91.

Similarly Genet illustrates the non-blackness of blacks by having his actors color their faces with black and coloured shoe polish.⁴¹ As Marilyn Frye argues that whiteness does not in fact refer to skin colour, since an individual can have pale skin and not be considered white, she perceives whiteness as a social or political construct. Frye claims that it is whites, and in particular white men who decide who is to belong to the white race. Whiteness is, therefore, not a 'natural race' but a 'race' as defined by social and political forces.⁴²

Whereas Gates and Frye question the notion of race in general, Fanon reveals how black identity can not be conceived as unified. He states that although people with 'black' skin are grouped in a given identity as being part of the black race, the black 'race' does not conform to a singular group. As Fanon writes, "The truth is that the Negro race has been scattered, that it can no longer claim unity."⁴³ The lack of homogeneity within black identity emerges in Genet's play through Félicité's address to the blacks:

Je ne peux vous décrire tous, ni même vous nommer tous ni nommer vos morts, vos armes, vos charrues, mais entrez. Marchez doucement sur vos pieds blancs. Blancs? Non noir. Noir ou blanc? Ou bleus? Rouge, vert, bleu, blanc, rouge, vert, jaune, que sais-je, où suis-je? Les couleurs m'épuisent ...⁴⁴

By unveiling the myriad of colours contained within the black race, Genet splinters the unity of black identity.

If Genet's portrayal of black identity is addressed from a Derridian perspective, then the inability to isolate black identity as a fixed presence necessarily implies that black identity is not a fixed identity but a locus of

⁴¹ Ibid., 9

⁴² Frye, *"On Being White"*, 114.

⁴³ Frantz Fanon, *White Skin, Black Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 173.

⁴⁴ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 80.

endless substitutions. The possibility of substitutions questions the existence of an original identity, which the substitutions are supposed to be imitating. The lack of an original identity surfaces clearly in the sacrificial murder which appears but does not really imitate an original crime, as this crime can not be located in *Les Nègres*. Approached from a Derridian perspective, the enactment of the "original" murder in the ceremony can be said to produce the concept of the original. According to Derrida, what seem to be mimetic repetitions of an original event actually construct the concept of the original. Imitation constructs its own genesis.⁴⁵ The absence of an original can be applied in a wider context in the play to question whether the black identity that the actors are imitating or the white identity that the court is parodying actually refers to original identities.

The blacks' failed ceremony brings to light Judith Butler's theory that identity is constructed through performance acts. As does Derrida's theory, Butler's theory displaces the concept of the original by illustrating how performance acts actually construct an original identity rather than imitate it.⁴⁶ Even though Judith Butler's work deal with gender, her theory can be applied to the issue of race. As masculinity and femininity are performed according to heterosexual norms, it could be argued that blackness or whiteness is

⁴⁵ By deconstructing Austin's and Searle's claim that performative utterances are to be understood as parasitic to non-performative serious utterances, Derrida displaces the concept of the original. In contrast to Austin, Derrida reveals that serious utterances spoken in 'real' life are in fact a special kind of performance. A serious speech act, such as a promise, can only be repeated on stage if this utterance can be repeated in 'real' life. The iterability of a speech act which enables an utterance to be performed determines its serious use in everyday communication. The fact that serious utterances are only a special case of performances leads Derrida to question the concept of the original. Any signifying sequence whether it be a gesture or an utterance connotes a particular meaning through its capacity to be repeated in both 'serious' and 'non-serious' contexts. The 'non-serious' or performative repetition does not imitate the original serious enactment of a signifying sequence but rather both are repetitions which actually construct the concept of an original. See Jonathon D. Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Cornell: Cornell University, 1982) 119-120.

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 138.

performed according to conceptions of what is black or white behaviour.⁴⁷ The idea that blackness is performed and performed in accordance to white authority emerges in *Les Nègres*. In the play, the blacks are gathered to perform their blackness for the white court and consequently the white audience of the play. Nevertheless the blackness which the blacks perform conforms to stereotypic conceptions of black identity. When Archibald asks his actors to put on their black identity by saying, "Que les nègres se nègrent",⁴⁸ he reveals that the performance of blackness in *Les Nègres* is contrived and not inherent. Although the blackness that is performed in *Les Nègres* is stereotypic, it is these stereotypes that construct the concept of a transcendent black identity. Even though it is possible for black and white identity to go beyond stereotypic and archetypal performances, *Les Nègres* reveals that racial identity does not refer to an original and archetypal identity but is constructed through individual performance acts. In an analysis of black identity, Gates remarks that, "There can be no transcendent blackness, for it cannot, does not exist beyond manifestations in specific figures."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ The idea that blackness is performed in accordance to the white conception of what black identity is reflected in a number of theoretical writings dealing with black and white relations. Donald A. Petesch comments on how in the presence of whites, black individuals will exaggerate their blackness to conform to white norms of what defines a true black expression. As he says, "When this [inter-racial relations between blacks and whites] occurs (in reality and in literature), blacks often engage in elaborate acts: of being black. As Jean-Paul Sartre's waiter plays at 'being a waiter in a cafe', blacks, in the presence of whites, often play at being black in the expressive ways expected of them." See. Petesch, A. Donald, "Masking" in *Black Literature*, *A Spy in the Enemy's Country*. (University of Iowa Press, 1989) 70. Furthermore, Bell Hooks observed how white women only perceived black individuals, as truly black if their behaviour reflected stereotypic 'black behaviour'. Hook's conclusion stems from her experience in the feminist movement, in which she claimed that her voice and other black women were ignored because they did not conform to the stereotypes. Hook states, "Our presence in movement activities did not count, as white women were convinced that 'real' blackness meant speaking the patois of poor black people, being uneducated, streetwise, and a variety of other stereotypes... We could be heard only if our statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant discourse." See Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 11.

⁴⁸ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 60.

⁴⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey", *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 275.

Although the way in which the blacks perform their skin colour is determined by the asymmetric relations of power, the ceremony by virtue of its deviation from ritualistic patterns reveals that there can exist free play within the constraints of an imposed identity. The actors' alterations of the ceremony's script reveals that the performance of identity is not necessarily fixed but can be changed within the rigid rules of the ritual. As does Genet's portrayal of the identity of *Les Nègres*, Judith Butler's performance theory illustrates how identity, namely gender, is not completely determined. There exists a conformity among women in the way they perform their gender. Their gestures must conform to a standard performance of femininity which is dictated by compulsory heterosexuality. Because identity is constructed through the stylized repetition of acts, Butler claims that the performative nature of identity bears the seeds of subversion from heterosexual conformity, for it is possible to do one's identity differently within the existing confines. Butler's theory veers away from the limitations of fixed identity by positioning identity within the polarities of determination and free will.⁵⁰ As Butler states,

Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of "agency" that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary.⁵¹

While the blacks' ceremony reinforces stereotypes of black identity, there is a simultaneous movement in the play which undermines the stereotypes that it portrays. According to Judith Butler, when stereotyped sexed behaviour is re-appropriated by an individual whose genital-sex does not conform to the sex that s/he is putting-on, the naturalness of sexed behaviour is questioned. Butler

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Genet Identity*, 142-149.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

calls acts, such as transvestism or cross-dressing, subversive bodily acts because they reveal the unnaturalness or constructionist nature of what is considered natural expression of masculinity and femininity. In such bodily acts an individual is able to consciously put on those gestures and clothes that make her or him appear to be the opposite sex.⁵² Butler's concept of subversive bodily acts and their role in disclosing how identity operates can be applied to *Les Nègres*. As Genet has his black actors deliberately put on gestures of blackness, he reveals how black identity is a construction. Genet has masked black actors acting as whites and black actors acting as blacks. Even though the blacks in the play perform their blackness according to the dictates of white society, they are nevertheless the ones responsible for producing their blackness. The blacks can, therefore, manipulate their performance. A number of subversive bodily acts occur in the play which question the naturalness of black and white identity. Although the blacks portray their blackness according to stereotypes, their depiction can at times become so exaggerated that it appears completely artificial. Archibald urges the actors to be black to the extreme when he says to them:

Je vous ordonne d'être noir jusque dans vos veines et d'y charrier du sang noir. ... Qu'ils s'obstinent jusqu'à la folie dans ce qu'on les condamne à être, dans leur ébène, dans leur odeur, dans l'oeil jaune, dans leurs goûts, cannibales.⁵³

Although the performance of blackness conforms to white conceptions of black identity, through the exaggerated depiction of blackness, the blacks consequently can manipulate and re-appropriate the stereotypes that have been cast upon them. The subversion of stereotypes emerges in the language of the play in which the binary divisions which separate black and white

⁵² Ibid., 135-141.

⁵³ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 60.

"essences" become intertwined. For instance, two black women have names that correspond to whiteness - Neige and Vertu. There emerges a reversal of what is commonly associated with blackness through the voice of Félicité, when she says, "Ce qui est doux, bon, aimable et tendre sera noir Le lait sera noir, le sucre, le riz, le ciel, les colombes, l'espérance, seront noirs. ." ⁵⁴ Whereas Félicité reveals how whiteness will become black, Vertu, through her 'Litanies des Blêmes', discloses the darkness in whiteness. Whiteness is no longer seen as purity and beauty but rather compared to various livid objects or creatures such as a t.b. death rattle, the belly of a cobra or a knife in the night.⁵⁵

It is during the ceremony, the space where the blacks perform their identity according to the dictates of an outside authority, that the blacks are simultaneously able to manipulate their identity. *Les Nègres* clearly negates the idea held by Sartre and his followers that Genet's ceremony is merely a sterile repetition which can not liberate the blacks from their imposed identity. If Genet's concept of identity is understood from the Sartrian perspective, it becomes completely determined by another.⁵⁶ As mentioned, Sartre claims that the goal of Genet's endeavours is to capture the being that has been imposed upon him. Implicit in Sartre's analysis of Genet is the idea that he is split in two. He lives an identity which has been cast upon him, a false identity, and he can not access his own identity. Genet is forced to live in the world of appearances.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 105..

⁵⁵ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁶ Although Sartre's theory of gesture which he draws from Genet's writing could bring forth a conception of identity that is not fixed, this theory is based upon a fatalistic perspective which chains identity to the other and consequently keeps identity determined. As Sartre says of Genet:

"Qu'est-ce donc qui l'empêcherait de devenir Stilitano? Puisque nous ne faisons que jouer ce que nous sommes, nous sommes tout ce que nous pouvons jouer, homme, animal, végétal, minéral même... Le monde poétique de Genet est un échange indéfini de formes et de gestes, un chassé-croisé de transmutations parce que tout a été réduit au geste et que la substance intime du geste c'est le regard des autres." See Sartre. *Saint Genet*, 324.

Genet's ceremony, as does Butler's theory, veers away from approaching the issue of identity as either true or false, or real or apparent. Firstly, as an incomplete ritual, the ceremony cannot maintain the distinction between the sacred and the profane, which can be translated respectively into the fake realm of the micro-performance and the real realm outside the performance. Genet further complicates the real/false opposition by referring to a 'real' revolution and execution outside the theatre. Archibald speaks of the real black man that is going to be executed.

... il s'agit de juger, probablement, de condamner, et d'exécuter un Nègre. C'est grave. Il ne s'agit plus de jouer. L'homme que nous tenons et dont nous sommes responsables est un homme réel.⁵⁷

In terms of theatre, this execution is unreal. The distinction between real and false breaks down in the play. Nothing can ever become completely false or real in Genet's realm. When the fakeness of an object or action is revealed, the void or inaction is replaced with another 'real' object or event. For instance, when the drapery that concealed the non-existence of the catafalque is removed, the reaction to the illusion of presence is that something else is there in its place. The queen cries out, "Mies chaises!", after the removal of the drapery.⁵⁸ During the fake murder of Diouf the merging of reality and illusion is presented through Village's and Ville De Saint-Nazaire's description of the murder which occurs offstage.

Rien. Ou si vous voulez, tous s'est passé comme d'habitude... et très proprement. Quand il est entré derrière le paravent, Diouf m'a aimablement aidé à m'asseoir ... Rien d'autre. Ils ont attendu sur un banc⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 84.

⁵⁸ Chaudhuri, *No Man's Stage*, 96.

⁵⁹ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 86-87.

The play of both reality and illusion, which is part of Genet's theatre, extends to the concept of identity performed in the ceremony. Although Genet reveals that black identity is fake in the sense that it does not refer to an original and true concept of blackness, a black person's identity becomes real through its performance and the repressive effects which essentialist-based concepts of blackness impose on black individuals.

Genet's portrayal of black identity could be approached from a combined essentialist and constructionist view. Diana Fuss incorporates the arguments of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Joyce A. Joyce, Anthony Appiah and Houston A. Baker, Jr. to arrive at an essentialist/constructionist approach to race. Fuss reveals how Joyce is critical of Gates' claim that race is an arbitrary signifier that refers to an absent signified. Joyce claims that the African-American critic, such as Gates, who deconstructs race as dominant conceptual category are betraying their African-American culture and attempting to deny their identity as black.⁶⁰ Fuss defends Gates' position by illustrating how Gates' approach to race as a sign without any true referential moorings reveals that race is a historical construct. Nevertheless, Fuss brings into her discussion of race, Houston A. Baker's claim that the category of race must be maintained as a political category to safeguard race from those who wish to silence its political voice. In a theoretical debate between Anthony Appiah and Baker, Appiah argues that race, as a term used in biological discourses, should be eradicated, while Baker seeks to retain the term race, as a political term in literary and critical discourses.⁶¹ Fuss reconciles these two stands by proposing that race can be maintained as a political category while recognizing that it is a biological fiction. The term race must be maintained as a political category to stake out a position

⁶⁰ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 77.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

from which to speak of the material effects of racial differentiation. As Fuss says, "...to say that 'race' is a biological fiction is not to deny that it has real material effects in the world; nor is to suggest that 'race' should disappear from our critical vocabularies."⁶²

It is possible to speak of the actual effects of racial differentiation while at the same time claiming that races do not exist as biological or cultural givens. Although Gates deconstructs the term race, he claims that there exists a distinct African-American voice in literary texts. Tzvetan Todorov claims that Gates' position is contradictory. If racial differences do not exist, then how can they influence literary texts.⁶³ Gates defends his position by retorting that although races do not exist, the effects of racism, namely society's attitudes to racial differentiation, position subjects. As Gates argues, "The term that I use to qualify my assertion is attitudes: 'how attitudes toward [pointed or purported] racial differences generate and structure texts by us and about us.'"⁶⁴ The effects of racial difference constructs different subject positions. Angela Davis illustrates how white women have a built-in privilege of whiteness which black women do not share and consequently their privileged position influences their attitudes. In particular, white women are often unable to see that the black woman's position is different from theirs. Davis evinces how the effects of racism in American society places the black individual in a position that is strikingly different from a white one.⁶⁵ In *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Frantz Fanon depicts how the experience of being either black or white produces differing consciousnesses. He discloses how Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical discourse which deals with the Other, or the alienated consciousness, can not

⁶² Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 91.

⁶³ Gates, Jr., "Talkin' That Talk", 404.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 405

⁶⁵ Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 119.

be applied to black consciousness. In black and white relations, the white man is not only the Other, but also the master whether real or imaginary.⁶⁶ In trying to adapt his philosophy to black consciousness in *Orphée Noir*, Frantz Fanon claims that, "Jean-Paul Sartre had forgotten that the Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man."⁶⁷

Attitudes about racial difference have the power to concretely and materially affect individuals' lives. *Les Nègres* incorporates myths of black identity and reveals both their unreality and their actual concrete power. Genet displaces the popular belief that the ability to dance and sing is innate to the western black as a result of her/his African roots. Village's speech which reveals his metamorphosis after captivity into slavery reverses this myth.

Je ne chantais pas, je ne dansais pas. Debout, royal, pour tout dire, une main sur la hanche, insolent, je pissais. Aié! Aié! Aié! J'ai rampé dans les cotonniers. Les chiens ont reniflé ma trace. J'ai mordu mes chaînes et mes poignets. L'esclavage m'a enseigné la danse et le chant.⁶⁸

The myths of black identity may be imaginary but their effects are real. In the play, the multiple forms of racism surface.

In revealing how Tzvetan Todorov's definition of racism is limited, Gates provides a more comprehensive look at racism. According to Todorov, racism is a behaviour which consists of the deployment of contempt and aggression for a particular group. Gates claims that racism is not merely a behaviour but an attitude or an error of thought. Gates argues that "'racism' exists when one generalizes about the attributes of an individual (and treats him or her accordingly)."⁶⁹ Furthermore, racist attitudes do not necessarily lead only to

⁶⁶ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 138.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁶⁸ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 54.

⁶⁹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *"Talkin' That Talk"*, 403.

aggression and contempt but may take the form of benevolence, paternalism and sexual attraction.⁷⁰ Henry Gates' additions to Todorov's definition of racism, which are its most cryptic manifestations, figure most prominently in *Les Nègres*.

The issue of sexuality and racism is interconnected on a number of levels in *Les Nègres*. Their correlation emerges in the relationship between Village, Vertu and the White Woman. The white woman, who is an essential part of each ceremony, is not an actual individual but a symbol. She represents the object of desire, that if possessed by the black man, could grant him higher status in the white world. As a result of the degradation that white dominant society has imposed upon black identity, blacks are inflicted by a sense of inferiority. Frantz Fanon comments on the black individuals internalization of an imposed inferiority complex:

If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process:

- primarily economic,
- subsequently, the internalization or, better, the epidermalization of this inferiority.⁷¹

Fanon argues that when a black individual regards his skin colour as a flaw, he or she seeks sexual contact with whites in order to elevate himself to the same status as the white individual.⁷² The desire of the black man for the white woman emerges through the fears of both Neige and Vertu, that in Village's hate for the white woman, whom he 'rapes' and 'murders', there lurks a hidden desire for her. Although Village's criminal acts, which he enacts in the ceremony, are intended to illustrate his blackness and hate for whites, Village is

⁷⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁷¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 13.

⁷² Ibid., 81. For a similar adaption of Fanon's theory to *Les Nègres*, see Keith Q. Warner, "Les Nègres: A Look at Genet's Excursion Into Black Consciousness," *College Language Association Journal* 26.4 (1983): 409.

suspected of actually loving his white victims. As Neige says.

Si j'étais sûre que Village eût descendu cette femme afin de devenir avec plus d'éclat un Nègre balafré, puant, lippu, camus mangeur, bouffeur, bâfreur de Blancs et de toutes les couleurs, ... si j'étais sûre qu'il l'ait tuée pour se confondre avec la nuit ... Mais je sais qu'il l'aimait.⁷³

Furthermore, Neige accuses Village of wishing to change the colour of his skin in order to possess a white woman. Village's hatred of his black identity renders him incapable of truly loving a black woman. Village is incapable of loving Vertu because she is a prostitute, who is dependent upon white men for her livelihood. The impossibility of Village and Vertu's relationship is disclosed when Village says, "Vertu marche sous la pluie à la recherche des Blancs, vous le savez. Non, non, il n'y aura pas d'amour pour nous..."⁷⁴

By virtue of her work and her skin colour, Vertu can never be a real love object for a man. The devaluation of Vertu is brought forth in the play when Neige says to Vertu, "Vous pensez donc être aimée de lui, vous, la négresse soumise?"⁷⁵ Village's desire for a white woman is an appropriation of white consciousness. In white-dominant society the status of the white woman is elevated above the black woman. Marilyn Frye reveals that the term 'woman' always designates a white woman. "It was breathtaking to discover that in the culture I was born and reared in, the word 'woman' means white woman, ..." ⁷⁶ The white woman, as an archetypal image of the positive connotations of "Woman", such as purity and beauty emerges, though at times in a satiric light, in the figure of the Queen. The privileged status of the white woman is reflected in the Queen's response to the blacks' decision to avenge the court. The Queen reveals her surprise at their anger towards her by saying, "Mais qu'est-

⁷³ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 39.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁶ Frye, *On Being White*, 117.

ce que je leur ai fait." Je suis bonne, douce, et belle!"⁷⁷ Genet demonstrates how the beautiful woman becomes synonymous with the white woman. Consequently, Vertu must steal the Queen's voice to be beautiful.⁷⁸ In a verbal showdown between the Queen of the court and Felicité, in which the Queen boasts of her superiority, Genet reveals how the elevated status of the white woman has deep historical roots.

Vous n'empêcherez, ma belle, que je n'ai été plus belle que vous. Tous ceux qui me connaissent pourront vous le dire. Personne n'a été chantée plus que moi. Ni plus courtisée ni fêtée. Ni parée. Des nuées de heros, jeunes et vieux, sont morts pour moi. Mes équipages étaient célèbres. Au bal, chez l'Empereur, un esclave africain soutenait ma traîne. Et c'est pour moi qu'on a décroché la Croix du Sud. Vous étiez encore dans la nuit ...⁷⁹

Whereas the white woman has been cast into a mythical figure of perfection and beauty, the black woman has been devalued. As the white woman has become associated with certain attributes, the black woman has become synonymous with a few pejorative stereotypes. The black woman has been limited by such stereotypes as mammy, matriarch and whore.⁸⁰ These stereotypic images emerge in *Les Nègres* through the figures of Neige, Felicité and Vertu. Neige and Felicité can be viewed as the powerful black woman, or matriarch, who has been accused of dominating and emasculating men⁸¹ and Vertu assumes the role of the prostitute. The white woman is de-sexualized and

⁷⁷ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 108.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 54-55. See W.F. Sohlich, "Genet's *The Blacks* and *The Screens* : Dialectic of Refusal and Revolutionary Consciousness." *Comparative Drama* 10.3 (1976): 223.

⁷⁹ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 104.

⁸⁰ Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981) 212.

⁸¹ Cora Kaplan, "Keeping the color in *The Color Purple*' Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism (London: Verso, 1986) 186-187.

the black woman is marked with a sexual image. Both black men and women are oppressed by a sexual image that has been cast upon them. Frantz Fanon argues that the sexual image that has been imposed upon black people debases them. He reveals that the equation of black identity with sexuality is an attitude that is deeply rooted in Western consciousness, when he states that, "It is just that over a series of long days and long nights the image of the biological-sexual-genital-nigger has imposed itself on you and you do not know how to get free of it."⁸² Through the Valet's continuous commentaries on the sexual prowess and physical beauty of black men, the idea of the sexual image that is linked with blackness emerges in *Les Nègres*.⁸³ Moreover, both in the ceremony of rape/murder, in which the black actors perform their blackness and demonstrate their separateness from whites, and outside the ceremony, the blacks emphasize their physicality. In an address to the court, Bobo reveals how only the black individual is associated with the body. Bobo says to Archibald:

La puanteur vous effraie, maintenant? C'est elle qui monte de ma terre africaine. Moi, Bobo, sur ses vagues épaisses, je veux promener ma traîne! Qu'une odeur de charogne me porte! Et m'enlève! (A La Cour:) Et toi, race blafarde et inodore, toi, privée d'odeurs animales, privée des pestilences de nos marécages..⁸⁴

Through the equation of blacks with corporeality, Genet alludes to the sexual image that is used to homogenize and limit black identity.

In white-dominated society, both the black man and black woman are

⁸² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 202

⁸³ The idea that blackness is associated with an oppressive image of sexuality appears in a great deal of the literature of black/white relations. See Timothy Maliqualim Simone, *About Face: Race in Postmodern America* (New York: Autonomedia, 1989) 45-47 and Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, *Across the Kitchen Table: A sister to sister dialogue*, 124.

⁸⁴ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 33.

degraded by stereotypic and oppressive images. Consequently, Village's inability to love Vertu is not only a response to his internalized hatred of his black identity but is also a result of a generalized devaluing of black women. The idea that Village's inability to love Vertu is symptomatic of a larger problem, namely the way in which black identity is constructed in society, emerges in Village's statement to Vertu:

...Quand je vous vis, sur de hauts talons vous marchiez dans la pluie ... Quand je vous vis, j'eus tout à coup, je crois, durant une seconde, la force de nier tout ce qui n'était pas vous, et de rire devant l'illusion, hélas mes épaules sont bien fragiles. Je ne pus supporter la condamnation du monde. Et je me suis mis à vous haïr quand tout en vous m'eût fait entrevoir l'amour, et que l'amour m'eût rendu insupportable le mépris des hommes, et ce mépris insupportable mon amour pour vous. Exactement, je vous hais.⁸⁵

When addressing the issue of black and white relations, Genet reveals how racism is not separate from sexuality. Furthermore, he illustrates how sexism or male dominance also influences racial dynamics. The interplay of racism and sexism in *Les Nègres* bears similarity to Bell Hook's discussion of their interconnection. Hooks argues that although white women are oppressed by sexism and black men by racism, both these groups have the opportunity to be oppressors in society. Racism gives white women the power to oppress blacks and sexism allows black men to become oppressors of women.⁸⁶ Genet illustrates how male dominance enables the black man to attain a level of power to which black women do not have access. Through his acts of rape and murder, Village dominates and oppresses white women. Although Village's desire to dominate women stems in part from the oppression that he experiences being a black man in a white-dominated society, he becomes an

⁸⁵ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 45- 46.

⁸⁶ Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 15.

oppressor nonetheless. Without excusing men or alleviating them of the responsibility for their actions, Bell Hooks reveals how myths of masculine superiority lead men to oppress women to compensate for their lack of power.⁸⁷ Genet demonstrates how the white woman finds herself in the position of both a victim of oppression and one of its perpetrators. Genet presents the double positioning of the white woman in society through the victimization of the white woman in the ceremony and the figure of the Queen, a representation of the privileged white woman who has been able to dominate and oppress both black women and black men. Black women are oppressed by both sexism and racism.

Although through Vertu's role as a prostitute, she dominates the whites, her domination is not as efficacious as the potential domination that oppressive systems in society grant black men, white women and white men. Nevertheless, Archibald says to Village that through Vertu's profession, she is more powerful than Village. "Elle a plus de pouvoirs que toi. Il lui arrive de dominer les Blancs - oh, je sais, par son coup de rein magique! Mais c'est encore les dominer."⁸⁸ Vertu manages to dominate her white male customers, because they are dependent upon her for their sexual pleasure. Vertu's dominant status can be viewed in light of the Sartrean account of the dominant status which the passive homosexual attains through his submissiveness to the dominant male. Although Vertu's acts are not intrinsically degrading, in society she is regarded as being in a position of subordination. Vertu reveals that her profession is more debasing than the staged performance of degradation that the blacks perform for the white court. She says, "Qu'on sache donc que la cérémonie de ce soir aura sur moi moins d'efficacité que celle que j'accomplis

⁸⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸⁸ Genet, *Les Nègres*, 48.

dix fois par jour. Je suis la seule à aller jusqu'au bout de la honte. ."⁸⁹ Genet illustrates how racism and sexism have placed the black woman in a position that separates her from black men. When Neige accuses the black men of desiring the murdered white women, she reveals that black women, unlike black men, can not gain any power through systems of oppression.

Pas pareil, messieurs. Dans votre haine pour elle il entrait un peu de désir, donc d'amour. Mais moi, mais elles (Elle montre les autres femmes), mais nous, les Nègresses, nous n'avions que nos colères et nos rages.⁹⁰

Through the character of Diouf, who later plays the role of the white woman, Genet illustrates how benevolence is one of the forms which racism takes. Diouf, who is the most resigned of the blacks to his condition, urges the others to adopt a more moderate and less revolutionary approach to deal with black oppression. Diouf's hostility towards the whites is lessened by his sense of indebtedness to the whites for all they have given him. Diouf says to Archibald:

Monsieur, je m'excuse. Comme vous, je voudrais exalter ma couleur. Sur ma tête comme sur la vôtre, légère et insupportable, est descendue se poser la bonté des Blancs. Sur mon épaule droite leur intelligence, sur la gauche tout un vol de vertus, et quelquefois, dans ma main, en l'ouvrant, je découvrais blottie leur charité. Dans ma solitude nègre, comme vous, j'ai besoin d'exalter mon exquise sauvagerie, mais je suis vieux et je pense ...⁹¹

The goodness of the whites towards the blacks is part of a general paternalistic attitude, which disguised as a positive enterprise, is in reality of form of domination. When the blacks revolt against the whites at the end of the play, the

⁸⁹ Ibid., 47-48.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁹¹ Ibid., 44.

Missionary discloses white paternalism and benevolence. The Missionary says to the blacks:

... Montrez un peu de bonne volonté. Regardez comme elle [la reine] s'est habillée pour vous rendre visite et songez à tout ce que nous avons fait pour vous. Nous vous avons baptisés! Tous! L'eau qu'il a fallu pour vous ondoyer? Et le sel? Le sel sur vos langues?⁹²

Through the Missionary's insistence that the blacks should be grateful to the whites for providing salt and water to baptize them, white paternalism is ridiculed. Genet's mockery of the court, a representation of white authority, unveils his criticism of white benevolence and paternalism which were and are still used as a means to subjugate.

Genet's *Les Nègres* is an enactment of the real effects of racism. His demonstration of the material effects of racism powerfully unfolds at the close of the play. At the end of *Les Nègres*, the entire play is transformed into a ritual which produces the real power of white domination upon black identity. Genet ritualizes his play by producing an asymmetric relation of power between the audience and the performers.

According to Richard Schechner, ritual and theatre are not completely isolated from one another. Any given performance can oscillate between becoming a ritual or a theatrical performance depending upon the attitude that both the performers and the spectators have toward the performance. When theatre is ritualized it yields efficacious acts. In a ritual, the performers are not merely performing a role but become possessed by the drama. The audience is transformed from a collection of separate individuals into a group or congregation of participants. The performance produces a real effect upon the performers and audience that extends beyond entertainment and brings the two

⁹² Ibid., 108.

groups together to dissolve boundaries.⁹³

In light of Schechner's theory, it can be shown how the play as a whole becomes a ritual. By stating in the opening pages of *Les Nègres* that the play is intended for a white audience, Genet transforms his audience into a collective unified by their shared "racial" origin. He also insists that his play be only performed by black actors

Any black performer can act in my play, anywhere, without permission to that extent, it no longer belongs to me. But you must certainly realize that the drama would cease to exist in the hall if white actors, made up as blacks, appeared on stage instead of real blacks speaking out their real miseries.⁹⁴

Genet reveals how the actors must be able to enact their own suffering through the language of the play. Taking part in performing *Les Nègres* becomes more than just playing a role but enables the actors to actually experience the pains of black identity. Richard C. Webb in his article titled, "Ritual, Theatre and *The Blacks*," reveals how the first production of *Les Nègres* incurred problems for the actors because they had difficulty coming to terms with the reality of their condition illuminated so powerfully by Genet's play.⁹⁵ For the black actors, the performance of *Les Nègres* has a ritualistic quality by being partially a performance of poesis rather than merely mimesis.⁹⁶

Although the aim of ritual is to bring the performers and audience

⁹³ Richard Schechner, "From Ritual to Theater and Back: the Efficacy-Entertainment Braid", *Essays on Performance* (London: Routledge, 1988) 124, 141, 142.

⁹⁴ Jean Genet, "To a Would-be Producer", *TDR* 7, no.3 (1963): 80.

⁹⁵ Richard C. Webb, "Ritual, Theatre and Jean Genet's *The Blacks*", *Theatre Journal* 31.4 (1979): 455.

⁹⁶ According to Victor Turner, Schechner's theatre workshops aim at "making not faking." The theatrical role grows along with the actor. Theatrical drama becomes ritualized. See Victor Turner, "Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology", *From Ritual to Theatre: Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) 93.

together, Genet's ritual does the opposite. This ritualized play enacts the racial separation between blacks and whites and the corresponding white oppression which the blacks must endure. For Genet, the separation of racial groups comprises a restoration of the social order even if the real racial separation, as revealed by the failed ritual of the ceremony, is impossible. The ritual quality of the play does not become blatant until the focus of the drama is taken off the micro-play of the ceremony and on to the play as a whole. When the five masked members of the court take off their masks, the division between the performers who are really blacks and the white audience is emphasized. The function of the micro-play, which was to act out the black identity of inferiority and degradation that has been imposed upon blacks by white domination, becomes the goal of the play as a whole. The white audience is therefore thrust into the position of the white court who have gathered together to watch blacks performing their blackness according to the white world's conception of what it means to be black.

Although Sartre's analysis of Genet provides the groundwork for understanding Genet's concept of identity as portrayed through the ceremonies, Sartre's analysis is anchored to a deterministic view of identity. It seems that identity for Genet is neither completely determined nor arbitrary. In parallel to Sartre, Genet does disclose in *Les Nègres* that black identity is determined. Nevertheless, as he illustrates that the way one performs one's race does not mimic an original, true or fixed identity, he intimates that the 'truth' of identity lies in its performance. Through the deviations of the ceremony from its rigid and ritualized form, which is intended to depict how black identity has been cast upon blacks, Genet's writing reveals that there does exist the possibility to perform one's identity differently. Although Genet demonstrates that blacks

could perform blackness through gestures that steer away from those sanctioned by the dominant white ideology, he conveys simultaneously the reality of white oppression and the effects of racism.

Conclusion

Since Sartre's analysis of the ceremony in *Les Bonnes*, the ceremony in Genet's plays has been viewed as a repetitive and futile act that only reveals the impossibility of being. Nevertheless, the ceremony in *Les Nègres* and its relation to the rest of the play reveals how identity operates. Through the interplay of reality and illusion in the play's portrayal of identity, Genet demonstrates that although racial identities are contrived, their effects are real. This conclusion unfolds through an analysis of how the ceremony is a failed ritual in the sense that it is unable to establish its goal, which is the differentiation between blacks and whites. Being black or white does not refer to a true, immutable essence that is based upon biological and/or natural givens. The category of race, as a mark of differentiation, is deconstructed. As the blacks' ceremony constitutes the performance of an identity that has been cast upon black individuals, racial difference emerges as a corporeal expression or body performance. Given that an individual performs his/her own race, it is possible for each individual to perform his/her race differently. Even though Genet allows for subversion of imposed identities, he simultaneously reveals how the dominant discourse imposes constraints upon the way an individual can perform his/her identity. In *Les Nègres* racism is real even though Genet depicts how actual difference between races are constructed. Racism assumes the multiple forms of contempt, aggression, sexual attraction, benevolence and paternalism. Furthermore, the interconnection of racism with issues of sexuality and male dominance also surfaces in *Les Nègres*. Genet's paradoxical depiction of race, in which he both eradicates differences between blacks and whites and emphasizes their separateness, can be read as a

simultaneous rejection of racial differences, as fixed, immutable terms, and a maintenance of differences in order to address the issue of racism. At the close of the play, Genet's *Les Nègres* is partially transformed into ritual through its power to make both the audience and the actors actually experience the oppressive reality of racial separation.

The analysis of race in *Les Nègres* is similar to the portrayal of sexual identities in three of Jean Genet's works, *Querelle de Brest*, *Notre-Dame-Des-Fleurs* and *Les Bonnes*. In Genet's world masculinity and femininity are expressed almost solely by genital-sexed men, with the exception of the female characters in *Les Bonnes* unless Sartre's claim, that the women's roles in the play should be performed by men, is taken into account. Sexual identities function as corporeal sets of gestures, expressions and displays that can be appropriated and manipulated by both male and female genital-sexed individuals. Masculinity is neither the exclusive domain of men nor is femininity the property of women. Through the performance of binary sexual identities asymmetrical relations of power, which privilege the male, are produced. The enactment of masculinity comprises an expression of empowerment that femininity is denied. Femininity, whether it is performed by actual men or women, is always subordinate to the masculine. Genet illustrates how the asymmetrical relation of binary sexual identities and their performance is similar in both the homosexual and heterosexual realms. In his works, only those homosexual men whose body expresses the feminine are considered to be homosexual. An equation is made between the impoverished status of the female and the feminine man. Masculinity, as it is performed by heterosexual men, homosexual men or genital-sexed women, as in the case of Lysianne in *Querelle de Brest*, is always privileged.

Femininity and masculinity are perceived through heterosexual filters even in a homosexual domain. Given that sexual identities are corporeal expressions that can be manipulated, it is possible for an individual to perform his/her body in a manner that deviates from the normative expression of masculinity and femininity. Nevertheless, the dictate of heterosexuality, which claims that it is natural for men to appear male and women feminine, prevails. Deviations from heterosexual behaviour bears punitive consequences. Genet reveals how 'feminine' men are punished, not only by heterosexuals but also by homosexuals. The idea that men must appear masculine is as much under the jurisdiction of homosexuality as heterosexuality.

Genet's characters are obsessed by the desire to either become or possess ideal expressions of masculinity and femininity which are archetypal constructs based upon the heterosexual discourse of what constitutes the natural. As archetypal sexual identities can never be fully embodied, the goal of his characters emerges as an impossible and imprisoning quest. Although individuals appear to be imitating ideal constructs, it is individuals' expression of masculinity and femininity that actually constructs original and ideal sexual expression. While stripping sexual identities of any claim to an originary, natural, ideal and fixed essence, Genet emphasizes archetypal masculine and female expression in order to disclose to what extent myths of sexual identity continue to exert an oppressive influence on the lives of individual men and women.

A number of theoretical precepts surface in the analysis of identity: namely the deconstruction of a fixed subject, the subversion of mimetic identity, the impossibility of a completely determined subject and the interplay of binary oppositions. Genet dissolves the fixed identities of man and woman, black and

white, homosexual and heterosexual and their reference to an essential nature. The concept of the original is displaced in a Derridian sense. A given identity does not mimic an original source but rather the original is constructed through the repeated performance of an identity construct. The existence of a true and original identity which can be copied is subverted. The performative nature of identity resolves the dilemma of whether identity is derived or arbitrary. Identity is positioned between the two polarities. Through the assertion that identity can be both arbitrary and determined, the rigidity of binary logic is broken down, although not completely dismantled. The body is not a passive recipient of an imposed identity, as Sartre's analysis of Genet's identity assumes, but instead actively participates in its enactment.

It is the performative aspect of identity that grants the subject a certain degree of agency. Given the theatrical depiction of sexuality in Genet's fiction and his exploration of the issue of race in the physical medium of theatre, his works emphasize identity as a body performance. Sexual and racial identities constitute corporeal expressions of movement, gesture, language and display deprived of a space of interiority or depth. Theories which assume that sexual or racial identities are based upon differences which are inherent, such as psychoanalytic or biologically determined approaches, have been excluded from the analysis of identity in Genet.

If identities are produced by corporeal expression, then it is possible that binary identities could be splintered to produce a multiplicity of sexes and races. The idea that identity categories are merely sets of mutable bodily expressions does not allow for subject specificity. As the dictates of heterosexuality and white dominance, which divide identity categories into asymmetrical dualisms of black and white, female and male, and homosexual and heterosexual, continue

to operate, an unwillingness to address the specificity would entail a denial of the oppression caused by sexual and racial differentiation. Although identity categories in Genet's realm do not correspond to an interior, fixed essence that unites individuals of a certain sex, race or sexual orientation, exterior social and political forces produce different groups under the pretense of inherent shared commonalities. Genet reveals how political forces create divisions between blacks and whites. In his address to American college students in the *May Day Speech*, Genet says, "We whites are living perhaps in a liberal democracy, but the black man lives, like it or not, under a paternalist, authoritarian, imperialistic regime."¹ The injustices which have created invisible boundaries between different groups have also led to individual forms of expression that differentiate one group from another. For instance, although Gates deconstructs the notion of race as a mark of differentiation, he recognizes that there exists a tradition of African-American writing. The recognition of a certain degree of specificity among individuals that share a particular sex, race and/or sexual orientation does not imply that these differences are biologically determined, transhistorical or transcultural but are rather dependent on, and change according to, a particular historical time and place. Consequently, there are aspects of *Les Nègres* which celebrate the uniqueness of black identity and elements of his novels which are glorifications of male homosexuality. In the following speech, Felicité glorifies blackness, even if it has been constructed as a flaw or a crime:

Eh bien, Dahomey! Dahomey! Nègres, venez m'épauler
Et qu'on ne laisse pas escamoter le crime. (A la Reine:)
Personne n'aurait la force de le nier. Il pousse, il pousse,
ma belle, il grandit, verdit, il éclate en corolles, en parfums,
et c'est toute l'Afrique ce bel arbre, mon crime! Les oiseaux
sont venus s'y nicher et dans ses branches la nuit s'y
repose.²

¹ Jean Genet, *May Day Speech* description by Allen Ginsberg (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1970) 19.

² Jean Genet, *Les Nègres*, 102

Through Genet's simultaneous exaltation of marginal identities and illustration of how femininity, homosexuality and blackness is degraded, the reality of oppression arising from difference can not be negated. The specificity of identity constructs are to be maintained as political categories in order to address the oppression resulting from racial and sexual differentiation.

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